

The Lucian Uprising



Etienne de L'Amour

The Lucian Uprising
By Etienne de L'Amour

Book 5 in the Shadowlands series.

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Front cover image: “Mediterranean Beauty” by the French artist Jules Joseph Lefebvre (1836-1911). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Dedication

Dedicated to you, with my good wishes.

A number of blind people, or sighted people in a dark house, grope and find an elephant. Each touches only a part; each gives to his friends outside a different account of what he has experienced. Some think that it was a fan (the ears of the animal); another takes the legs for pillars; a third the tail for a rope, and so on.

~ “The Teaching Story”, Idries Shah.

The shadow of scepticism is dispelled in the light of real knowledge.

~ Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen in *The Lucian Uprising*.



1. A low ebb

“Oh, screw it! *Screw* it, screw it all!”

Any neighbour who'd overheard Randal Smith cursing in this fashion would have been disgusted – and rightly so – but Randal used such expletives sparingly and advisedly, and those who really knew him would have realized that something must have gone seriously wrong, if they hadn't already noticed him building up to this crescendo. It was the inevitable culmination of many torrid threads in his life, really.

Randal clenched his fist and waved it menacingly at the computer screen in front of him. For a brief moment he thought the unthinkable: of picking up the infernal, if precious contraption and hurling it from his first floor window to the hard concrete of the back yard below.

But he restrained himself and dutifully removed his floppy disk (lest it be scrunched by the dropping of the recording head when he switched off), went through the correct and safe shut-down procedure, yanked the plug from the wall socket and stormed through to the kitchen to make himself a coffee before bed.

“Shit, damn, blast, bugger and bollocks!” he cursed under his breath as he rolled yet another cigarette; pacing the floor, waiting impatiently for the kettle to come to the boil. If there was one thing he detested, it was to be beaten – and this time, despite his best efforts, well and truly beaten he most certainly was. What he desperately needed right now was a jolly good shag to sort out his frustration, but that was about as likely as him winning the national lottery.

Randal Smith was at a low ebb in his life. He aimed high and pushed himself hard; far harder than he would allow himself to be pushed by others, and far harder than he would – and seldom did – push others. And sometimes as a consequence, and despite his dogged determination, stamina and a degree of intelligence, his efforts met with failure, plunging him for a time into a dark state of depression and self-recrimination. Don't get me wrong: there was nothing Randal relished more than a challenge, and his

working philosophy was to look toward solutions rather than problems. What other folk labelled problems and went out of their way to avoid, to him involved solutions that were just waiting to be found. Every dark cloud has its silver lining, if you like. He could take more than his fair share of shit without buckling under the pressure (and admittedly he was a bit of a shit magnet), but there was only so much even he could take. Even for him, there was an elastic limit.

Randal liked to fill his waking hours working on some exciting and challenging project that would push the boundaries of the unknown – well, as yet unknown to him – and this inevitably drove him on a roller-coaster ride of highs and lows, as one technical or creative challenge was solved, to his delight, only to leave him facing the next hurdle. Just as the destination was always around the next corner, as they say, so with his projects there was always a next hurdle.

Every now and again, having hit an apparent brick wall and exhausted head-on assaults and all manner of devious and ingenious ways of navigating around the obstacle, seeing that the challenge was beyond his capabilities, his day would darken. And only with great reluctance was he able to let go and drag himself away, to spend a little time out before searching for his next great endeavour.

The annoying thing was that, though his friends at the local computer club were as as baffled as he was and couldn't help him on this occasion, and his local book lending library was sadly lacking in the technical department, someone out there had probably come across this technical hitch before and was sitting on the solution ... if only they could somehow meet up. But that was highly unlikely. Maybe in a few months time, some guy would publish a magazine article or a cookbook and all the questions he'd ever wanted to ask would be answered. But he wanted an answer now, not in a few months time.

Some day in the not too distant future, maybe he'd be able to connect his PC clone up to the telephone line and dial into some kind of forum, pose a question and within minutes receive an answer from some expert computer geek at the other end of the line? Not that that helped him in any way at this current moment, but at least there was a glimmer of hope of eventually finding

light at the end of the long, dark, lonely tunnel.

Where was God when he needed a little help along the way, hey? Some said that God was dead; others that God is alive and well and working on a less ambitious project. Hey, pal, let me tell you: I've been there, done that, got the blood-stained t-shirt; I know just how it feels, okay?

Why did he do it? Why did he subject himself to such torment? Indeed, that was a question he often asked himself. At times he was exasperated with himself. It was something that had begun in early childhood, probably. His father worked shifts in a warehouse and his mother ran a busy guest house. And when father wasn't at work, he was either helping out with the guests or else engaged in some form of do-it-yourself or some household repair. So Randal got used to playing by himself and keeping himself company; and that's probably where his avid interest and dedication came from. Well, truth be told, perhaps we should call a spade a spade and use the dreaded word obsession?

Randal had been married for several years, and though this time could not be rightly called halcyon, still he'd come to know love, responsibility and success.

Then later, much later, came the bombshell of his divorce, bombshell being the operative term. It was truly heartbreaking. And all so sudden and unexpected, or so it seemed at the time. Looking back, he could see that the seeds had been planted and the weeds allowed to grow and come to strangle the relationship. It's easy to see such things in hindsight: but foresight, eh? Now that would be something worth cultivating.

"Your mother only carried you for nine months," Louise had spat at him: "I've carried you for six long years." And she'd said much more besides. What really stung him was the final remark she made before tossing his belongings out on the street in an old potato sack. "You know, I was the only person in the world who'd have you."

Initially he was devastated by this bolt of lightning out of the blue. He thought the flow of tears would never end. It wasn't until all this happened that he realized just how much he had invested in the marriage and just how confluent his relationship with Louise had become. So when he ended up in a seedy flat on his own, he was left with this awful dark, empty abyss and suddenly

realized that he didn't even know who he was any more, as a unique, individual, human being; now that he wasn't half of the couple, "Louise and Randal".

There was a sense of betrayal, too, that was hard to swallow at first, though over time he came to realize that, of course, he had played his own part in the sad and torrid affair and, after the separation, the mud-slinging of the subsequent divorce. He eventually came to recognize himself in the vile picture painted of him, and there wasn't a single day that went by when he didn't feel deep remorse for what had gone before.

Their relationship had had its highs and lows, and it was crazy at times: he being workaholic, she being spendaholic; with the one feeding on and depending on the other.

He'd have liked to have talked it through and patched things up, making concessions in a more relaxed way. He could actually be generous and laid back about many things in life, ever at risk of being used as a doormat. But that was totally out of the question now Louise had her new man. It was all or nothing for her. And in a way, really, who could blame her? The only thing he found truly objectionable was the way she set about poisoning the minds of the children and her family toward him. Again, that said, he was never without his personal regrets, though he could do his own self-flagellation without her rubbing salt in the wounds, thank you very much.

Okay, okay: at the end of the day there could be no ifs and buts. Some things were inexcusable. So, he was a better person now. Well, that was a good thing, of course, but it was also cold comfort. It's never too late to learn, so they say? Up to a point. It's *always* too late to learn some things. Sometimes too late to give the unoffered kiss. Always too late to take back the arrow that's flown. Oh, yes, he'd had ample opportunity for belated soul-searching and conscience-scouring since the divorce.

So what was with all this work? Well, he guessed that it was partly a rediscovery of what actually interested him, as opposed to being in his family's interests; and partly his way of shutting out the world and filling – or at least papering over – that awful void. And it helped him to regain his self-confidence, which had been absolutely shattered by the divorce. His mother and father came from a former generation in which the D word was looked

on with much disdain and tut-tutting. He'd really screwed up and let the family down badly, and his feeling of self-worth had plummeted considerably in the process.

Well, he *said* that with his projects there was always a next hurdle. That was true up to a point. But the hurdles ended when a project was completed, give or take a few later tweaks. And as the project ended, after a brief spell of quietly congratulating himself on his achievement he was actually left feeling a little sad. Completion was actually a bit of an anticlimax to him, you see. A dismissive and hurtful “Yeah, big deal. So what? Move on” and he quickly lost interest as the novelty of his newborn baby, his latest project, wore off. And from that it was easy enough to deduce that for him the thrill was in the chase, in the adrenaline buzz, even in the transcendence of pain, rather than in the end result. What he really needed was someone to work with who could take his baby off his hands and market it, leaving him to move on to the next project.

One of the few things that Randal could pride himself on was the fact that he was learning all the time, and gathering much experience – as much from failure as from success. What was key was not so much knowing *what* as knowing *how*; of developing transferable skills, experience that could be put to use elsewhere and in often unrelated future projects.

So what next? That was something Randal seldom knew, except at work where his manager spelt out precisely what he wanted him to do that week, that day or in the next minute, like pronto. It wasn't that he floated along through life like a lost feather at the whim of the breeze; it was more a question of being on the look out for and receptive to whatever opportunity happened to come his way. From whence such opportunity and inspiration came, he knew not. Perhaps it was in some way linked with grace, a gift from the divine? Whatever: experience had shown him that in fallow times there was little point in forcing the issue; rather, it was more fruitful to simply remain patient and trusting that when ready, inspiration and insight would arrive of its own accord, in its own good time. Yes, over the years he'd found that there was a certain, deep and subtle rhyme and reason to life – a mystical dimension, if you like – not apparent at a superficial level or to the casual gaze, and that defied logical

analysis.

Draining the last dregs of coffee from his mug and mind made up, Randal went into the kitchen cutlery drawer for a pair of scissors, stalked back through to the living room, picked up his floppy disk and promptly and irrevocably snipped the disk in two, tossing the remnants in the overflowing waste-paper basket. Good riddance to bad rubbish, as his father would say, bless his cotton socks. That would put paid to any thought of having one last attempt at fixing the project. In his experience he'd found that "one last go" could be drawn out into weeks and months of dogged effort (or conversely, weeks of sheer idleness). There was absolutely no sense in flogging the proverbial dead horse.

A good night's sleep always helped under such vexing circumstances, though no doubt when he awoke the next morning and remembered having dispatched his project to the bin, there'd be a moment of regret. And yet ... He smiled, for having worked on the code for the last three months, he knew it pretty much off by heart, so if worse came to worst, and though it would undoubtedly be a tedious slog, he could always find a way of resurrecting his beloved. And who knows, the code might be all the better for it?

In the meantime, as his father would also say: a change is as good as a rest. And on that happy note, Randal turned in for the night.

2. Austerity measures

The following day Randal got up early and showered, not that he had anywhere special to go. They'd been making cutbacks at work and with feigned reluctance, they had to let him go. So, he was between jobs at best and between one job and the dole queue – perhaps even the streets – at worst. He had been hoping that the latest project might have provided him with something worth adding to his résumé. Sadly not.

It was the same all over. The end of the Second Great War had left Gothgoria saddled with huge debts on loans owed to the Freelands and the government had recently introduced quite severe fiscal and austerity measures in order to keep public finance afloat and begin the unenviable task of rebalancing the books. Rationing was still largely in force and the fragile economy was faltering. So this was the worst possible time to be without a job.

With the exception of briefly popping round to the corner shop for milk and tobacco, Randal had pretty much confined himself to barracks during his recent spate of work and looking around the kitchen he discovered that his fridge and cupboards were decidedly bare and sadly neglected. As for what was still lurking there after all this time, with the exception of some dried pasta, a slab of cheese and a recently opened and half-consumed can of baked beans, the only fitting place for it was the bin. The cheese had begun to grow mould, but the bulk of it could probably be salvaged.

He thought he might pop round to see his friend Dave Jones, if he was around, and did consider visiting on the way back from the supermarket, but thought better of that and decided to return to the flat and restock his kitchen first, then go out again. It was sweltering out and he wanted to get the frozen stuff and the fresh fish in the freezer compartment as soon as possible, as he could do without another dose of galloping gut rot.

Sometimes neglected as his own flat was, Dave's place was a dive. The only way in was through a gate and gingerly down a narrow alley which was liberally strewn with dog muck, like a

mine field, thanks to a neighbour's untrained and unrestrained dog. The last time Randal had visited, Dave told him that the post office were refusing to deliver his mail due to the mess. The poor lad was having a hard time of it, drinking heavily to cope with worries about keeping his head above water, which of course only made matters that much worse.

There Dave was, a guy with the Intelligence Quotient of a brain surgeon, for heaven's sake, reduced to pumping petrol part-time at the local garage. These days more and more businesses were taking folk on part-time. That way they didn't have to lash out so much on things like holiday pay, sick pay and insurance and could more or less hire and fire at will, with impunity. And yet in a way, when the Powers That Be weren't giving him a hard time, this fellow misfit seemed content in having found this simple niche in life. Dave had pretty much opted-out of mainstream society, steadfastly refusing to buy-into things like the Harvest Holiday in particular and most other commercial enterprises and consumerist paraphernalia in general. As long as he had cheap beer; bootleg baccie; his computer; contact with fellow sentient beings, and the chance to take part in voluntary work – which he enjoyed – he was a relatively happy, if at times privately tortured, bunny.

Like Randal in many ways, Dave had somehow fallen through – or maybe escaped – the net. Depending on your point of view that was either a net for societal safety or for psychological conditioning, otherwise known in its extreme forms as brainwashing. Of course, we all behave in conditioned ways. This lubricates our relationships and our life in general, and we'd have a hard time of it without some conditioning; but there's a difference between consciously opting-in as desired or as and when necessary, at best, and being a mindless puppet at the mercy of conditioning, at worst.

Whatever. At the end of the day, what Dave lacked in one or two lesser departments, he more than made up for in having a big and generous heart.

“Hey hey! How the Devil are you, Randal? Long time no see,” Dave whooped as he answered the door and saw who it was on his doorstep. That was quickly followed by: “Fancy a pint?” and, without stopping for a reply: “Hang on, I'll just get my

jacket.”

Again, whatever: Randal wasn't the kind of guy who could easily say “no” to a friend; or no to another pint, for that matter.

“Why not,” he nodded eagerly. “Sounds like a good idea.”

Randal was hoping that they might make a bee-line for a cosy little pub called the *Red Lion*, not far from Dave's flat, but as ever Dave was counting his pennies and headed for *Jollie's*. *Jollie's* was one of the new super pubs and a bit too big, bright and open for Randal's liking, but the beer was pretty well kept and dirt cheap, so what the hell. No big deal.

“How much? *How* much?” Dave spluttered at the barman in disbelief as the man handed them their drinks. He'd had the exact change counted out and he had to rummage in his pockets to make up the difference.

The barman shrugged. “Don't blame me, pal. I don't set the taxes. Blame the Exchequer.”

Dave passed Randal his drink, grabbed his own and had a quick slurp, so that he didn't spill the contents, which were full to the brim; then spun on his heel and searched around for an unoccupied table.

“Bugger me,” grumbled Dave. “That's another ten pence in taxes the frigging treasury's put on beer. The price only went up at the budget last month. Don't they realize that beer and baccie are two of the three simple pleasures the common folk have these days?”

“Three?”

“That and sex. And they'd bloody well tax that, if they could. Everywhere you look, everything's taxed and regulated. And they call this a free society. Roll on the revolution, that's all I can say.

“I mean, what the hell are they playing at? I tell you, this country's going to the dogs,” Dave grumbled as they returned from the bar and settled themselves at a table, but he dismissed the gloom with a flourish, as if taking off a hat or layer of unwanted clothing. He wasn't attached to such things. “Your good health, squire.

“Anyway, Randal, what have you been up to recently?”

Dave was a fellow computer nerd,¹ so Randal could talk to him in freely, without having to either resort to a simple “Oh, this

1 A knowledgeable and obsessive computing enthusiast; a geek.

and that. You know, computer stuff” or having to go to great lengths to explain each item of mind-numbing jargon.

He told Dave about his latest project, culminating in taking the kitchen scissors to his floppy disk.

“You know, if you want to erase the contents of a disk, all you have to do is type 'format', with the added bonus that you can use the media again for some other purpose.”

Randal nodded sheepishly.

“I know how you feel, though. Love-hate relationship.”

“Snap! Those words were on the tip of my tongue, Dave,” he laughed.

Dave took out a pen and rummaged in his pockets looking for something to write on. In the end he picked up one of the cardboard beer mats, separated the layers and wrote on the inside of that. “Tell me what the problem was and I'll ask around on Comms Net. Someone there's bound to know the answer, or at least be able to point you in the right direction.”

“Hey, thanks! Even a simple: 'Sorry, it can't be done' would help,” he replied eagerly. “At least that would save me a lot of misplaced effort.” So he detailed the problem as Dave scribbled it down.

Then: “So, what's Comms Net?”

“Comms Net is where it's all happening, man. It's a message board run by the computer department at the University,” Dave told him.

“So how do you access it?”

“Over the phone line,” Dave informed him.

Randal dropped his jaw. “Wow ... wonders will never cease. I was only wondering about that possibility last night and thinking 'If only ...'”

“You dial into the University's mainframe and leave a message on the bulletin board, and hopefully some other user out there will see your message and post a reply. It's magic, Randal. And the Powers That Be having got their sticky paws in the honey pot – at least not yet. When we get back to my place I'll give you a demo ... if the phone company haven't cut me off, that is. I was a bit late paying the last bill and they sent me threatening red letters ... which, of course, sat on a shelf at the post office because they were refusing to deliver until all the dog muck in the

alleyway was cleared up ...”

“I'm more than willing to pay you for the call,” he offered, standing up and fishing in his trouser pockets, but Dave was having none of it.

“It's my treat,” Dave replied and motioned towards the empty glasses. “Same again?”

“Just a half, I think. I can't take it like I used to.”

“From what I recall, you couldn't take it then!” Dave laughed, adding: “Only joking.”

“Well, yes, that is actually true enough, Dave.”

Remembrance dawned on him. “Oh my god ... I was hoping all that was long forgotten.”

“No worries, Randal. It's all water – well mostly old ale – under the bridge. And I'm a fine one to talk. Back in a minute, I have to point Percy at porcelain, then I'll get the drinks in.”

It might all be water under the bridge as far as Dave was concerned, but these painful memories still made Randal squirm inside with shame and embarrassment.

“I don't mind going to the bar while you're away,” Randal offered.

Dave gently pushed him back down in his chair. “No, I'll go. It's my treat. You sit there and keep the seats.”

A few minutes later, Dave came back with three pints: two for himself and one for Randal. “Thought I'd best double up before they call last orders,” he explained.

“I feel guilty letting you pay”

“Hey, Randal, that's what friends are for. Anyhow, you can buy a round next time. Sorted? We could hit the clubs on Friday night, if you like”

“Well, there's a thought.”

Just then, a lanky youth wearing a dark green shirt and close-cropped hair emerged into the bar from the street with a pile of papers in his hand. Looking furtively around him, he sped from table to table spreading his wares.

“Oy!” The barman must have caught sight of the lad, because he came out from behind the bar and made a bee-line for the lad. “We don't want your kind around here.”

Having his collar felt, the youth beat a hasty retreat, cursing as he went. “You'll regret this.”

“Really? You and whose army?”

The lad broke free from the barman's grip. “You just wait.”

“Yeah, yeah; I've heard it all before: 'When we rule the world' and all that crap.”

“Sorry about that,” the barman apologized, going from table to table and confiscating the printed sheets, but not before Dave had surreptitiously palmed one and slid it inside his jacket pocket.

“What was all that about?” Randal asked Dave when the barman had returned to serve another customer.

“Green Shirts,” Dave informed him.

“Come again?”

“The P.W.F.P.”

“I'm still none the wiser, Dave.”

Dave gave him a sideways look and replied: “Randal, you need to get out more. What planet have you been living on? The Patriotic Workers' Freedom Party. Well, their Youth Brigade, to be precise.”

“So what do they want?”

Dave pulled the crumpled sheet from his pocket and passed it under the table.

It was a flyer, printed in bold text with the logo of the P.W.F.P., a sword and shield, top right. Randal quickly scanned through the contents and passed it back to Dave, who returned it to his pocket. “What's it say?” asked Dave.

“Looks like they're a bit peeved about the latest austerity measures and they're holding marches through local towns, culminating in a mass rally outside Parliament. They're warning of mass lay-offs and an impending depression.”

“They're probably right,” Dave nodded. “Comms Net's newsgroups have been a-buzz with rumours about the economic crisis. Breed people like cattle; turn them into passive puppet consumers; raise an army to regulate and tax them; make a fat profit out of them at every conceivable opportunity; get them into debt way over their heads; and encourage the masses to breed yet more. That's the name of the game.”

“People are finally beginning to wake up to the fact that it's all a huge and cynical con, Randal, and that they're being taken for suckers. And now the bubble's burst. What we're seeing now is only the beginning.”

Dave fished out the flyer and scan read it before hastily returning it to his pocket. "What are you doing at ten o'clock on Saturday?"

Randal shrugged. "I have no plans."

"Good. In that case, we might as well go along to the march and see what's happening." Then, out of the blue: "Did I tell you that I'm being laid off, too? Bainbridge, who also own the chain of garages I work at, has been struggling for some time and they're going into administration."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, Dave. I had no idea."

"It's that ruddy Freelands Supply Company. They build a market as big as a warehouse out of town and artificially lower their prices until little shops in town and even supermarkets like Bainbridge's go to the wall. Then they raise their prices. Another thing I heard about them is that they'll place massive orders with their suppliers, taking up most of their production. Then all of a sudden, they'll stop the orders. Again, when the supplier goes under as a result, they'll buy them up, sometimes simply to strip the assets and make a fast and fat profit."

"Of course, the solution to that is for the suppliers to avoid temptation and to make sure they maintain a diverse clientèle, but they don't of course, especially in these hard times. If an order comes in, they snap it up while they still can, without thinking through the consequences. And local councils, too, bend over backward to accommodate the likes of the Freelands Supply Company, again without sufficiently joined up thinking."

"Anyhow, the garage wants me to work until next Sunday, to sell off the last of the petrol and diesel and help clear up at Bainbridge's afterwards, but they can go fly a kite. Bright and early tomorrow I'm off to the Labour Exchange to see what other jobs are on offer, before the masses descend on the place."

"Do you support the Patriotic Workers, then?"

Dave shrugged. "I thought it might be a day out, and a chance to show the government how we feel; that we're not going to be pushed around. You know, sometimes I think that we might have been better off had we lost the war. You can say what you like, for all his evil ways, Develin worked miracles with his country, dragging it kicking and screaming from rock bottom to super power in just thirty years."

Most people cupped their hands together in a mixture of fear and earnest prayer when they heard that unholy name uttered, but not Dave. As ever, he was quite blasé about such things.

True enough, thought Randal. They may not have lost the war, but they'd certainly suffered greatly in its aftermath. The Freelands were the only ones to have come out of that dreadful affair well in pocket, and he voiced these feelings.

Dave didn't hear him, however. Since a newcomer had been feeding the one armed bandit for several minutes now, without winning, he'd decided that it was high time to milk the machine. Seconds later it coughed up, leaving the other fellow looking bemused and more than a little unhappy. Dave returned to the table and showed off his winnings. "Not bad for a day's work, eh? This will more than cover the cost of the beers."

Some people like Dave really did have the bottle² and the knack.³

2 The courage or the nerve.

3 The often uncanny ability.

3. On the march

Friday night came and went, leaving Randal's balls still aching from too much anticipation and a distinct, and predictable, lack of requital, and also leaving him with a regrettable after-taste in his mouth. The closest he'd come to pulling a woman that night in *The Cattle Pen* had been a brief dance, on his own with Dave as ever, in which a stranger had momentarily and quite intentionally rubbed her silken posterior up and down his groin. She perhaps felt sorry for him, or maybe she was just doing it for a laugh?

Saturday morning came all too soon and, since Dave failed to turn up at his door as arranged, Randal went round to his pad, carefully negotiating his way down the alley through the mine field of dog poo, to find Dave still in bed and looking as bad and as dishevelled as Randal felt. Assuredly, it wasn't solely the tax man they paid for these simple workaday pleasures.

Two bitter and treacly black coffees later (since Dave had no milk, nor sugar) and a hasty dash across the city, they finally caught up with the tail end of the long, snaking march. There must have been thousands in this mass, and what was surprising to Randal was the fact that though, yes, here and there there were blobs of green-shirts and cropped hair, there was a wide variety of folk there from just about every walk of life. There were the trades guilds, as might have been expected given the deterioration in the economy; but there were also veterans from the war; housewives with children in pushchairs; butchers, bakers and candlestick makers; even the odd grease painted clown. And yes, there were a good few fellow freaks.⁴ Their concerns were, of course, a serious matter, and yet there was a distinctly carnival atmosphere on the march that day; perhaps made all the more jovial by the sun, with just sufficient welcome breeze in the air to keep them from frying. Yes, as promised, it actually was a day out for most. Nevertheless, it was also noticeable that most of the business premises along the planned route were closed and some had their stout timber and iron shutters up. They were taking no

4 Guys with long hair.

chances, in case the marchers' mood should turn ugly, as could so easily happen.

They were escorted along the route by police officers both on foot and on horseback, and every now and again at strategic points there were groups of officers. They let the marchers pass peacefully, then trotted off to regroup further along the route. Again, though he didn't see many happy, smiling faces amongst their ranks, the police seemed content enough with things as they were. There was only the odd scuffle, with no injury done, as a group here or there would test the police by veering off to one side or the other. It was all pretty good-natured that morning and into the early afternoon.

Come twelve o'clock, Dave was looking around for a pub where he might partake of a glass of beer. "Hair of the dog," as he called it, which was an abbreviated way of saying "the hair of the dog that bit you." The belief was that the ingestion of more alcohol would act as a cure for a hangover produced by over-consumption the night before. True enough, as it happens: it did work. On this occasion, however, apparently by order of the city council, there wasn't a single licensed premises open for business along the way.

This didn't deter Dave, however, and dragging Randal from the crowd without warning, whilst their escort's attention was turned elsewhere, he led them down a narrow alleyway between two shops, and this way and that through a warren of narrow streets, to a little pub he knew of, which was thankfully still open. So they had a swift pint in there before hoofing it back to the high street to catch up with the march before it entered Parliament Way and its final destination in Claris Square, opposite the Elected House.

Not long after rejoining the march, their progress began to slow, however, and soon came to a halt. As more and more folk moved to one side or the other to see if they could spy what was happening at the head of the giant snake, so they began to fill the whole width of the high street. And many used this means to head up the road to find the reason for this delay.

One or two of the stewards were approaching them now, from the front of the march.

"What's up, mate?" called out Dave.

“The police are barring the road to stop us going up Parliament Way. They're trying to shepherd us into Bootham Park, instead.”

Then the steward called out in a loud voice. “But we're not having that, are we, brothers and sisters? We demand to go to Parliament!” And with that a wave began to pass through the mass as they began to chant their sloganized and orchestrated demands ever more loudly at the stewards' behest.

“What do we want?” came the prompt.

“Fickles out!” came the immediate reply. Fickles was the Prime Minister of the incumbent government. Well, that was most people's response. A bawdy minority were calling for the surgical removal of his testicles, which they merrily rhymed with his family name.

“When do we wan' it?”

“Now!”

Dave dragged Randal off to one side and they pushed their way forward through the crowd toward the head of the column, to see the action for themselves. There were thousands in this irresistible force of the crowd, yet still they seemed unable to push on. Alas, the police were out in force near Parliament that day, and they were a resolutely immoveable object. Folk would surge forward every now and again, only to be pushed back by deep ranks of police with heavy riot shields, or beaten about the head, body and legs by long, leaden batons. For the first time on the march, blood began to spatter on the cobbles of the road. And the police had angry, snapping dogs with them, which deterred even the most bold and foolhardy amongst the marchers.

They spent almost half an hour in this tension-racked stand-off, facing each other down; the police stony-faced as the protesters hurled insults and pelted them with raw eggs and rotten tomatoes, though fortunately with nothing more dangerous. Then finally the confrontation was side-stepped or at least temporarily postponed. After some earnest deliberation, the stewards emerged from their huddle and began to direct the masses to the left, to assemble in the wide expanse of grass of Bootham Park. Right now they could do with a break to have something to eat and drink, having brought provisions with them; to relieve their aching bladders in the bushes, and – the day still being young – to

plan how they might make an assault on Parliament later on.

He and Dave had not thought to bring provisions with them on the march and by around half past two, their stomachs beginning to gurgle in unconsummated anticipation, Dave suggested that they leave the park for a time and adjourn for a little liquid refreshment and whatever food was on offer at some nearby hostelry.

They threaded themselves this way and that through the protesters sitting on the grass and calmly walked up the gravel pathway to the park gates but, to their consternation, the police who were massed there denied them passage. Dave protested, of course, and attempted to slip through their ranks, but two burly officers manhandled him, pushing him back into the park.

Dave muttered something under his breath about a violation of human rights.

“If you don't button your lip and sod off, sir,” one of the police, a sergeant, advised him in no uncertain terms, “then I shall have no option but to arrest you for a breach of the peace.”

They complied, of course, and skirted the park toward the southern entrance, to find that that exit, too, was barred to them, and they were met with the same reply.

Dave was never one to be outdone. “We could try the railings. I reckon we could climb that old oak over there and shin along one of the branches overhanging the road.”

They got as far as the foot of the tree, only to find that the police had already thought of such strategies and were patrolling the roads which ringed the park.

To the east of the park the landscape formed a natural amphitheatre with a raised section at its focus which might be used as a stage. One of the stewards stood atop this broad hump and called upon the crowd through a loud-hailer to gather round. Apparently a series of speeches had been organized which had originally been planned for the rally opposite Parliament, but which would now be heard in the park instead. That would leave the evening open for – quote – “more direct action”, whatever that might entail. It sounded ominous.

With nothing better to do with their time, Randal and Dave joined the protesters across at the amphitheatre. It would have made more sense for folk there to sit down on the grass and ease

their aching feet, but some, especially those nearer the front, had decided to stand, and the only way to get a decent view of the proceedings, within earshot at least, was to stand and join them. As it happens, one of their neighbours, a gangly youth with long frizzy hair was quite merrily rolling up a stash of wackie baccie⁵ and was only too happy to pass one their way, so that certainly helped brighten up their afternoon. Randal seldom smoked the weed, but he was always willing to make the odd exception, on the basis of “a little of what you like will do you good”. Well, as with all things there were exceptions, and the weed was perhaps listed amongst the notable exceptions, but what the hell?

The opening speeches were suitably strident. The first was from a guy who represented one of the crafts guilds which made artefacts necessary for the very survival of traditional society such as the much under-appreciated beer barrel, without which the likes of the whiskey industry would collapse, though heaven forbid that it should.

The second was the spokesperson for the municipal and general workers union, a great many of whose members had been made redundant recently. Rather than spouting statistics, as had the first speaker, this lady illustrated her speech with actual individual cases, showing the traumatic and ghastly effect that the current recession was having on real folk like you and me or the girl next door. Okay, the speech was deliberately emotive, but in doing so she certainly had Randal's vote and he clapped enthusiastically.

“Do you know who she is?” Dave asked him.

Randal shook his head. “She's a good speaker, that's all I know. What she has to say makes a lot of sense. She has my vote.”

“That's Gelder Barton. Does that ring a bell?”

“No, should it? Is that a rhetorical question, Dave?”

“She's Bradley George's bit of stuff.”

Randal shrugged his shoulders. “I'm still none the wiser. I've led a sheltered life, you understand.”

“Well, perhaps if I told you that Bradley George is the Supremo of the Patriotic Workers' Freedom Party”

“Oh.” That was rather unexpected. “Ah, I see. Perhaps I was

5 A cannabis- or marijuana-laced cigarette; a joint or spliff.

a little hasty.”

“He's a Patriot and she's an ardent Socialist. And yet they've managed to form a strange unholy alliance against what they both see as 'the Greater Enemy.'”

One or two of the others close by were eyeing the pair, having caught a smattering of their conversation and, sensing this, Dave drew Randal away and they wormed their way through the crowd and around to the other side of the amphitheatre.

“So what's 'the Greater Enemy'?” he ventured to ask Dave when they were clear of the crowd, skirting around it.

Dave nodded toward a figure in a dark green shirt, flanked by a pair of heavyweight minders, who was heading for the stage. “That's the man to answer your question, Randal.”

“Bradley George?”

Again Dave nodded, but said nothing more, as they threaded their way back through the assembled mass.

“Brothers and sisters,” the man began, after being introduced to them by the lady speaker. “It is heartening to see so many of you gathered here today. The Party has only just begun, a tiny acorn. Imagine how large and powerful it will become over the weeks, the months, the years to come. It is the destiny of the Party to become a mighty and majestic oak. But in order for this growth to occur, it will need your unswerving loyalty, dedication and support.

“As I said, it's heartening to see so many of you here on this fine summer's afternoon, and yet it is, is it not, a cause of great sadness. So many of you and your loved ones have fallen victim to the grave malady that is sweeping the nation; that is sweeping the world.

“Don't think for one moment that the present governments will get you out of this ghastly mess, for it is a mess of their own creation. It is a ghastly mess of such staggeringly huge proportions that nothing short of the utmost effort, dedication and sacrifice on the part not of a few but of a great many – of you and me and millions like us – will be sufficient to turn things around and bring this country, and the world, back onto an even keel.”

There were calls of “Hear, hear!” at this point and the crowd of protesters broke into applause.

“The government can only tinker, when it is quite clear for

anyone to see that tinkering will only pull us deeper and deeper into the mire. What is needed, friends, is a new and revolutionary vision. And the last thing I mean by that is that we should side with that pathetic rabble, the Collectivists. We are Patriots to the marrow and nothing short of nationalist revolution, for the greater good of our beloved country and its people, will suffice. And if that means that we have to sacrifice – even sacrifice our very lives – then that is what we must be prepared to do, for the Greater Good, I say again. For the Greater Good.

“It has been wisely said that 'if you are not a part of the solution, then you are a part of the problem.' And believe me, the current Powers that Be are at the rotten core of the problem. And in order for us to move toward that solution, well, such obstacles must be removed. Removed as a good gardener will fiercely prune back the old, dead wood of a rose bush, quite mercilessly, knowing that only in this way will a new, vigorous growth, a new bush, be grown.”

He paused until a fresh round of applause had died down, waving it to an end.

“So what are these problems facing us, you may ask – indeed, many of them you probably know, but there is merit in enumerating them here and now, so that we are all singing from the same hymn sheet, as it were.

“Well, I'll tell you. This world is infested by lice and leeches and other parasites intent on sucking the life-blood from our veins. We are weighed down by corrupt politicians and fat financiers. We are weighed down by the great burden of the infirm: the infirm of body and the infirm of mind. We are weighed down by the great burden of the deficient. We are denied free access to our destiny by those of inferior race and inferior creed.”

The man banged his fist down repeatedly, punctuating each word.

“And now is the time to put an end to this. To rectify this unacceptable situation. Once and for all.

“Let me tell you about the lice, the leeches, and the other blood-sucking and disease-infected parasites who infest this world.

“How many of you have been given loans by banks at

criminal interest rates? How many of you were sold on this as a dream solution for all your woes?"

Many hands were raised.

"How many of you have buckled under the hellish regime, unable to afford the repayments?"

More hands went up.

"And where are these fat cats now? Now that the economy is spiralling from crisis to slump to recession and ever down into depression? Where are they now, eh? Now that these fat cats have overstretched their resources?"

"How many of you now desperately need a loan to keep your businesses afloat?"

More hands were raised.

"These fat cats, these leeches, can't give you loans now, because they overstretched themselves, offering loans to folk who had no possibility of maintaining their payments. They squandered your wealth. And now they are saddled with such levels of bad debt themselves that they, too, are going under, and dragging you with them.

"Is it right and proper that fat cats like this earn a thousand times the annual salary of a wife and mother who works at the local Freelands Supply Company? Don't you find that obscene? Well, I do. I'm a realist, I know that some jobs are more demanding and come with more responsibilities than others. I understand and believe in the need for incentives. So it's not that I'm asking for total equality like the Levellers, that would be folly. But I do expect a more reasonable and equitable state of affairs. Do these failed captains of industry really need and deserve six figure golden goodbyes and six figure, index-linked pensions when they're booted off the board for incompetence? Well, do they? I ask you?"

The crowd began chanting "No! No! No!"

"Let me tell you something that the Government doesn't really want you to know. They don't want you to know that twenty five thousand of you have filed for bankruptcy in the past three months alone. That's twice the level it was in the first three months of this year. Four times what it was for the whole of the six months prior to that.

"And as for the banks, six major banks and twenty four

minor institutions are experiencing such financial difficulties that they have had to furtively go cap in hand to the Treasury to bail them out. Your Government keeps telling you that your money is safe in the banks. Well, let me tell you – it is not. If each of you went to the banks now to draw your money out, the reserves they keep are so small a proportion of what they loan out, and these scant reserves so depleted by bad debt, that no more than one in ten of you would be able to get your money out before the banks were forced to bolt their doors and call in the police to protect them. As for the rest: you would get nothing. Not a penny. Perhaps this is news to you, perhaps not, but ninety percent of the money they loan out is money they don't actually possess. Many people think that such banks loan out money that others have deposited as savings. They don't. They just write out an IOU. Then they sell these IOUs – so many of which have proven worthless of late – to others. If this wasn't so insane, it would be a farce.

“So, how many of you, unable to go to the bank have had to resort to pawning your possessions for a pittance? Or obtaining money from criminal loan sharks?

“Yes, I can see by your raised hands and by your knowing nods that a great many of you are in these dire straits.

“And how many of you are forced to work part-time? Or been made redundant altogether? Dumped on society's scrap heap?

“Many, many. Yes, I see.

“Well, let me tell you, brothers and sisters. When the Party comes to power – by hook or by crook – we will sweep this criminality aside. And it will be the criminal bankers and the criminal pawnbrokers and the criminal loan sharks who will find themselves made redundant and on society's scrap heap. It will be they who end up begging for scraps in the street from *you*.”

“And let me tell you. Even before we come to power – and come to power we inevitably shall – one way or another, these blood-sucking parasites *will* reform their ways, or else we will take action to force them out of business.

“If these were the only leeches living in this country, in the world, then the great task before us would be all that much easier. But they are not. How many of you had had your job taken by an

Outlander or a Yonderer?⁶ Yes, more hands are raised. These filthy, stealing vermin will take your job at less than half the decent wage you deserve. And how many of you have to pay exorbitant rent and outrageous taxes on your market stalls and businesses, only to have Travellers and other wastrels coming along, setting up their unregulated street stalls and stealing your hard-won trade from you? Yes, even more hands. And what do these vermin do to fit in with our ways, I ask you? They go out of their way to keep to their own kind and their own ways; shunning what we have to offer them.

“Well, let me tell you, we will not fight shy for fear of upsetting the apple cart: these people will have their stalls overturned. They will be driven from the streets. They will be forever wiped from the face of this once proud land, along with all the other opportunist Freelanders plying their inferior wares here, when we embark on the final solution.

“And let me tell you: the days in which the idle vermin and parasites on the criminal fringes of society can take your hard-earned taxes to pay for them to live off the welfare state – those days are numbered. The choice we have to offer is quite simple and direct: either shape up or ship out. And if they do not ship out of their own accord, then by God we'll do it for them!”

This last remark was particularly well received by the protesters.

“Trust me, we will not let you down. We will not allow such iniquity to continue. Join our Youth Brigade. Vote for and support the Party, and the Party will support you. We will lead you along the road to freedom and salvation.

“Thank you for being here in our time of need. We'll speak more on this matter in due time, but right now – in spite of the opposition we will undoubtedly face – we march on Parliament. We march to make our voices heard. We march to let them know what we think of their lamentable failure. We march to let them know that it is time for them to go. And good riddance to bad rubbish! We march to let them know that a new day has dawned, and that there is no place in the new regime for them and those like them,” the man concluded. Taking a bow and declining a call to encore, he quickly left the makeshift stage, to rapturous

6 Those from Kronstein, the land beyond Dravine.

applause.

Following the lead of several of the stewards who had now taken off their florescent yellow jackets to reveal their dark green credentials, the mass, now inspired to action by the speeches and cheap grog they'd brought with them, left the amphitheatre and made for the eastern entrance leading out of the park and onto the high street not far from Parliament Way. Despite their mass and renewed impetus, however, there was no way that the deep ranks of police would let them pass.

Others had broken away from the main throng, however, and set about the park railings behind the amphitheatre. Working together, it was only a matter of moments before the railings gave way under their combined weight.

What's more, when the iron railings finally broke free of their concrete anchor, at the base, and pulled free of the cross-beam that held them together near the top, this militant faction found that they had ready-made weapons with which to tackle the more lightly armed police.

When this group surged out of the park further down the road, the police were momentarily caught on the hop and they made the mistake of splitting into two groups: one to bar the park entrance and the other to chase after the breakaway group.

Seeing what the militants had achieved through sheer weight of numbers, it was not long before the other protesters followed their lead and toppled yet more sections of park railings, so that they, too, were armed.

As these protesters ran at the police, Randal fully expected a bloodbath, but this didn't happen. At the shrill of a police commander's whistle, the police broke ranks and made a dash for it. They headed toward Parliament Way where they had reinforcements, perhaps in an effort to regroup.

What happened next came as something of a surprise to Randal and Dave. He had fully expected them all to form up and head for the Elected House, but instead whilst the less militant amongst the protesters were sent off toward the Parliament buildings, the bulk of those who'd armed themselves with the spiked railings headed back down town, away from the trouble.

They didn't make it up Parliament Way that evening. The police had them well outnumbered and still had the army in

reserve, with fixed bayonets, guarding the perimeter of the Elected House, should all other options fail. But at least the people had had their say.

“So, how do you feel?” Dave wanted to know as they cut across the city through the warren of back streets that the lad knew and loved so well. “We certainly made them think today, eh?”

Randal nodded. “Yes, I'm sure we've given them cause for thought. Though whether this will actually change anything in the long term, I wouldn't like to say. The current regime is pretty well entrenched.”

“Today was just the beginning, Randal. Just the beginning. You wait and see.”

“So where did all the Green Shirts bugger off to, that's what I want to know.”

“Maybe there was wisdom in their madness, Randal? They probably saved us from a blood bath tonight.”

4. Clearing up

It was only early the next week that they found out why the Green Shirts hadn't been with them that night. By the time the police had sussed that something was wrong, and the alarm bells and emergency telephones had begun to ring across the city, it had been too late for them to act.

As Randal walked up the high street in search of fresh provisions, he was truly shocked. He passed shop after shop with its windows boarded up and many with their doors forcibly broken down.

He walked up to Wiggins' where he bought much of his meat, shunning the pre-packed cuts they sold at the supermarket. Those were often injected with water to boost the weight and would shrink to half their size as they cooked. Old Elizabeth Wiggins was stooped low outside her shop with a brush and pan, clearing up shards of glass from the pavement. Her door had apparently survived concerted efforts to break it down, though two of the wooden panels had been staved-in.

"Here, let me give you a hand," he offered, and she gladly handed him the broom whilst she held the dustpan in place.

"What's happened?" he wanted to know. "There are so many shops up town that have had their windows broken. And they have initials daubed on their doors in green paint. What's the 'Y' mean?" he asked as he rounded up some of the glass and swept it into the dustpan.

Missus Wiggins looked up and peered deeply into his eyes. "'Y' for Yonderer," she sadly informed him. "And I gather that 'V' is for vermin."

Elizabeth, of course. It did have a foreign ring to it.

He didn't really have to ask, but did all the same. 'Do you know why someone would do a thing like this to you?'

She pulled herself up to a standing position, all four feet ten of her. "Because we're different?" she suggested with a shrug. "There are some like those Green Shirts who don't like us being here. They're forever poking their heads round the door and asking why we foreigners don't 'eff off' back to where we've come

from. It was only a matter of time before things escalated.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that, Missus Wiggins. I had no idea.”

Only now, faced with the actual consequences to ordinary, everyday folk in the community of Bradley George’s ideology, did it really strike home to Randal just what a fool he’d been to have fallen for the spiel⁷ hook, line and ruddy sinker.

“We’ll soon have this cleared up, though, thanks be,” the woman smiled as they went inside the shop. “Some folk haven’t been so lucky. Old Mister Gregore at the newsagent’s was still in his shop finishing off his book-keeping. He took a stick and confronted the jobs and they gave him a kicking. His wife called a doctor and the doctor had him rushed to hospital sharpish as soon as he saw the state he was in. Mrs Gregore says he’ll be in for at least three weeks with broken bones. It was only good fortune that the poor old man wasn’t killed.

“And I’m sure this won’t be the last of it,” sighed Missus Wiggins. She went inside the shop and Randal followed her in.

“These thugs won’t stop until we’re all gone from here. This was just a hint of what they’re capable of. How anyone can raise youths to turn out such thugs is beyond me. There was a time when youths respected their elders. But not these days, more’s the pity.”

“Are you open for business?” he asked tentatively.

Missus Wiggins rolled up her sleeves to wash her hands and reached for her apron. “I most certainly am, Randal. What can I get you today?”

“Oh, just a pork chop, please.”

“Right you are, my dear.” She picked up two but only put the one on the scales to weigh before beginning to wrap the pair together.

“No, no, just the one thanks.”

The lady smiled. “You’re a growing lad. Just a token of my appreciation for your help, Randal. You’ve restored my faith in human nature.”

“No, no, I must pay you. It’ll cost you a fortune to have your window and door repaired, Elizabeth.”

Like his friend Dave, she was having none of that, which made him feel all the more guilty for his own involvement.

7 The speeches; glib sales talk.

Anyhow, he thanked the lady kindly and headed across the road to the newsagent's, if it was open, given what he'd heard about poor Mister Gregore. That was another foreign name, of course, though the sign above the shop said the business was established well over eighty years ago, which inferred that old as he was, Mister Gregore had been born and bred here in Gothgoria. Rumour had it that he was a veteran of the Second Great War and had been decorated three times for his bravery; and that his grandfather had fought in the First Great War in his own day.

Mister Gregore was a hard-working and amiable man, well into what should have been his retirement, with a lovely and helpful wife. With wide cat's eyes, high cheek bones and a welcome smile, she must have been quite a beauty in her youth. They had their shop open from seven in the morning to eight at night, seven days a week (except for half-day closing on Wednesday), come rain, shine; hell or high water.

That day, however, the shutters were still up and the doorway, with the door still hanging off its hinges, had been blocked by a heavy display cabinet wedged in behind it.

With the newsagent's closed, Randal headed for the supermarket to stock up on tobacco, milk and a few other minor provisions. On his way out, he bumped into Heléna, Elizabeth Wiggins' daughter, who sometimes helped out in the butcher's. Like Randal, she was in her early twenties and a good six inches taller than her mother, but still quite petite. She was a raven-haired beauty and bubbly and intelligent to-boot. As ever, they exchanged warm greetings, though seldom more than that before moving on their separate ways, but on this occasion they stopped for a time to discuss the recent attacks. War and crises tend to bring folk closer together.

"I'm very worried by the Green Shirts," Heléna told him, wiping a stray tear from her cheek. "Hardly a day goes by without one or other of them leering in the shop window and making obscene gestures or miming a corpse with a broken neck at the end of a hangman's noose. They won't stop until we're gone or else laid out on a mortuary slab."

He shook his head sadly and patted her lightly on the shoulder to show sympathy and support.

“But for the fact that we have nowhere else to go and no other form of income, I'd suggest to my mother and father that we sell the shop and move away before something more serious happens. The Green Shirts call us *effin' Yuns* and *parasites*, thinking that we are rolling in ill-gotten gains at the expense of others, and yet – if the truth be told – we're struggling to survive just like any other family hereabouts. The jewellery and the family silver – family heirlooms more of sentimental value than anything – they've all been sold to keep our heads above the water.”

“Anyway, it's been good talking with you, Randal,” Heléna thanked him, tears again welling up in her eyes. Suddenly overcome by emotion, their conversation was cut short and she abruptly turned away and dashed off.

“You, too. And take care,” he called after her, though it was unlikely that she'd have heard him.

5. A dramatic turn of events

The following Tuesday morning, Randal was abruptly awoken from his sleep by a dull *thud-thud-thud*. He leapt out of bed, ready for anything, still too dazed and bleary-eyed to know what was going on.

Again came the *thud-thud-thud*. Someone was at the front door. The blasted bell must have stopped working again. Water gradually crept into the cheap plastic casing and corroded the connections.

Stark naked, he went over to the window, stood to one side and furtively peeked out through the lace curtains to the street below. Ah, it was Dave. Randal went to his wardrobe and fished out his white bath robe, which was the nearest thing he had to a dressing gown, then clattered down the steep stairs to open the door.

Dave had an anxious look etched on his face.

“What's up? I thought the Third Great War had broken out.”

“It's no laughing matter,” responded Dave, clearly peeved⁸ about something. “Hello, hi, good day. Well, maybe not so good. Any coffee going begging?”

He came inside and dashed upstairs, taking the stairs two at time and made a bee-line for the kitchen, with Randal following on in his wake.

“What's up?” Randal asked him.

Dave took the kettle to the sink, filled it, lit the gas and sank down on a chair at the kitchen table while Randal saw to the mugs.

“I could explain, Randal, but it's best I show you. Actions speak louder than words. Get dressed while the kettle comes to the boil, then we'll hit the streets.”

“Okay, boss.” He dashed through to the bathroom, gave himself a cat lick and brushed his teeth, then went through to the bedroom to dress.

“So, where are we going?” Randal wanted to know as Dave set out at a furious pace toward the town centre.

8 Concerned and annoyed about.

“You'll see soon enough.”

As they turned onto High Westgate, Randal first heard the tumult, then saw the crowds gathered in the street. As the approached, he could see that they were massing outside Sawyer's, one of the high street banks.

“That's the scene that greeted me earlier this morning,” Dave nodded. “I went to the bank to draw on my savings to pay the rent. Got a few weeks behind, you see, and the landlord was none-too-happy. Every month my old man puts a little in the bank to help me out.”

Dave pushed through the crowd, with Randal in tow, and for the first time Randal saw the police standing guard outside the bank, with a row of armed soldiers, their bayonets fixed, standing in reserve.

“Rumours of the imminent collapse have been spreading around,” Dave explained, “so not unnaturally folk are anxious to withdraw their savings while they still can.”

“So there's been a run on the bank, I take it.”

Dave raised his eyebrows. “A run on the banks? Ruddy stampede. You'll see the same scene outside every single bank on the high streets. A few folk managed to get their money out; then they shut their doors. When things began to get ugly, they called in the police. And when it got too hot for the police, the police asked for assistance from the army. Just as Bradley George predicted.”

Sounds like a self-fulfilling prophesy, Randal thought, but he refrained from saying it out loud.

“So, what do we do?”

“Well, there's no point in hanging around in the hope that they'll open the doors, Randal. Nor breaking the doors down, for that matter. I doubt that there's any more money in their vaults to be had. Now, when people find out that the vaults are indeed empty, then the fireworks really will fly.”

Toward the front of the massing crowd, a group of green shirted youths were gathering. “If the banks won't let us have our money, then let's picket the Treasury,” one of them yelled.

“Fickles must go!” called another.

“Out with the whole damn government!” retorted a third.

“We have to put a stop to this. Are you with us?” one of them

called to the police who barred the way.

The police made no response, standing their ground and as stony-faced as ever.

But just then, one of the soldiers broke ranks and marched over to join the Green Shirts. "Aye, it's time they went. I'm with you."

One of the Green Shirts pulled off his own arm band, with its sword and shield motif and fastened it to the arm of their new comrade.

"Private, this is mutiny!" bellowed the sergeant of the guard. "Arrest that man! I'll have you up before a firing squad for this, laddie boy!" He pulled out his pistol and waved it menacingly.

But within moments, more and more of the soldiers had broken rank, and after they went, all discipline in the police ranks evaporated and they either ran or slunk away from the scene.

And with that, the red-faced sergeant found himself standing there facing the crowd on his own.

"I'll have no part in this insurrection!" he bellowed at them, waving his pistol menacingly, but all he received in response were jeers of derision.

A single shot rang out – startling the crowd – and the sergeant, his pistol still raised to his head, was thrown backwards against the bank's doors by the impact of the bullet, and slithered down to the ground, the glossy black and white paintwork streaked with bright red arterial blood and splattered with pink and grey exploded brain matter.

A wave of primeval fear rushed through Randal's system and he turned and staggered from the front of the crowd.

One of the Green Shirts walked over to the sergeant's prone body and prised the pistol from his sticky fingers. He ran his hand over the door, then daubed his face with the still-warm blood in a macabre ritual, distasteful in the extreme.

"Brothers and sisters, it is begun!" this spokesman called to the crowd triumphantly. "Now let's see what Finkle and his fellow has-beens have to say about the matter!"

That single spark was all it took to set the whole tinderbox alight. And this one of the few countries that had never had a coup, and never once had considered this even a remote possibility.

Randal was deeply anxious to get away from the mayhem. Rather than follow the rabble, he strongly suggested they head back to the flat. Once there, Dave brought out his hip flask, not out of celebration but rather to calm their jagged nerves. Randal found a couple of glasses at the back of a kitchen cupboard. They were dusty and had been growing cobwebs until the spiders died and shrivelled up, so he gave them a good wash first.

“So what now?” Randal asked Dave.

“God knows. What can we do? Whatever happens happens, and there's little to nothing we can do about it. So I guess we just carry on doing what we're doing: business as usual, and all that jazz, until instructed otherwise by the Powers That Be. Oh hell, speaking of which”

Dave looked at his watch, leapt to his feet and headed for the door. “A mate of my brother's phoned today asking if I wouldn't mind doing a shift or two 'on the side' due to staff illnesses, and it had completely slipped my mind. I'll catch you later.”

“On the side” meant cash in hand, with no questions asked, and nothing declared to the tax man.

And with that, Dave was down the stairs and out of the door, though not before downing the last of his drink and safely pocketing his hip flask. To quote his own turn of phrase, “that would have been sacrilege.”

Randal ventured out again later that day, after a bite of lunch. He thought it wise to thoroughly stock his larder, just in case there was a run on the supermarket shelves as well as the banks. Who knows what difficulties they might face in the coming days? The government might declare martial law and impose a curfew. There might be power blackouts. Best get some candles in while he remembered. And some cans, dried milk and baccie. Anything could happen, and probably would.

It was pandemonium in town. Folk were dashing around like headless chickens and gathering in gaggles to feverishly exchange the latest news. Rumours were rife. And, as he had correctly predicted, the local supermarket was packed, with lengthy queues at every checkout, snaking their way right down the aisles. It took him half an hour to get from the back of one queue to the front. Loaded down with heavy provisions, he made his way back to the

flat, glad to be off the bustling streets.

Once back, he switched on the television and turned to the metropolitan channel. A simple blue screen was displayed with a message in bold white text. This very much reminded him of the dreaded “blue screen of death” displayed on his computer screen whenever the system encountered a fatal and irrecoverable error. There was soothing classical music playing in the background, but no other sound. The message merely apologized for unspecified “technical difficulties” which the company hoped to resolve as soon as they could.

Randal flipped back and forth between the channels, to find that all other channels were totally blank, so he switched back to Metro and instead turned to the radio to see what he could find there.

For some unknown reason, as Randal whisked through the wavelengths on the tuner, all he could get were foreign channels. He waited impatiently as the minutes went by and the lunchtime news approached. The news came and went without mention of anything untoward in Gothgoria. Two o'clock; three; four and five passed by, still with no news. This in itself was an ominous sign. Presumably the broadcasters had been instructed to maintain this blackout.

At last, however, bang on six o'clock, the soothing music abruptly stopped and an announcer reported that the technical issues had been resolved and that the service would now resume.

Randal grabbed his coffee, rolled up a cigarette and drew up a chair facing the television.

The screen cleared and without any kind of voiced-over introduction, he saw cameras pointed at the interior of an office. Judging by the crest on a wall behind a desk, centre screen, it was a government office. The desk was empty and surrounded by cameras and microphones, but as the scene unfolded, a rather frail and anxious looking gentleman appeared. He walked over to the desk, sat down behind it and began to read out what looked like a prepared script. It was Fickles, the Prime Minister, and his speech was clearly tense and faltering. He looked so grey, too, as if he'd had the life sucked from his body and aged overnight. Had Randal not seen it with his own eyes, he would not have thought such a thing possible. Yes, here was a truly beaten man.

“As you aware,” the man began, “Gothgoria – indeed the whole world – has been experiencing the most testing of economic crises of late. That crisis has resulted in many, many businesses failing, and that in turn has led to an unprecedented rise in redundancies.

“It is with great sorrow that I have to tell you that things have spiralled still further out of control, and despite our most earnest efforts, there is nothing more that we can do to prevent this downward spiral.

“Today, rumours spread around the city of the imminent collapse of our banking system. Despite the fact that such rumours were unfounded, these rumours actually caused a run on the banks, and as a direct consequence, these banks actually did run out of funds to meet requests for the withdrawal of savings, have been forced to close their doors, and cease trading through insolvency.

“Please believe me – and above all be calm and patient – when I tell you that contingency plans are in place and that your government will do everything in its power to see that those of you who have lost money in this banking collapse will be compensated with Treasury funds.

“Your government has let you down badly throughout this crisis. *I* have personally let you down badly. And so, it is with considerable regret that I have to tell you now that I have spoken to the Elected House and tendered my resignation, effective of midnight tonight.

“Furthermore, I feel that it is only fitting that my government steps down, also effective of midnight tonight. A general election will follow in due course.

“And in the interim, acting on the advice and strong feeling of Parliament, I have reluctantly imposed a state of emergency and, um ... a state of martial law. This is for your own protection, you understand. There is absolutely no cause for alarm. So please remain calm and be patient with us as we work earnestly and steadfastly on your behalf.”

Fickles paused and took a sip of water, then cleared his throat and continued.

“Again in the interim, this state of emergency is to be presided over by the Patriotic Workers' Freedom Party – the only

credible opposition whose reputation has not been sadly tarnished by this sorry affair – and the Supremo of the P.W.F.P, Bradley George, will be installed as Acting Prime Minister in the Elected House at ten o'clock tomorrow morning.”

“And now, I'd like to hand you over to General Sir David Higginbotham-Smythe, commandeer-in-chief of the armed forces, who will explain to you what the state of emergency and martial law will entail.”

“Thank you for your support over the years and your renewed support in these dark days. It has been an honour, a privilege and – recent events notwithstanding – a great pleasure working for and with you. May God keep and protect you during these difficult times. Thank you and good night.”

With no further ado, Fickles pushed himself up to a standing position, his hands visibly shaking, and handed over to the general. Now this man was razor sharp and as bright as the polished brass buttons on his tunic.

6. A taste of the new regime

The following day, Randal again ventured out. He was slightly unnerved by the presence of soldiers on the streets, patrolling up and down in pairs, and with armoured vehicles standing on one or two of the major crossroads in the town centre. But he was pleased, too, to find that despite the imposition of martial law, the streets were orderly. Everyone seemed to be going about their business as normal, and he was relieved to see that Mister Gregore's newsagent's was once again open for business.

“Good morning. How is your husband?” he asked the lady behind the counter. She laid her duster to one side and came to the counter to serve him.

“Oh. He's bearing up nicely, my dear, all things considered. Old as he is, he has the constitution of an ox. And an appetite to match. In fact, he says the food is so insufficient that he wants me to smuggle in baking,” she laughed. “He's still in hospital, but due out in a couple of weeks.”

“Have the Green Shirts been back?”

Mrs Gregore puffed her cheeks out and blew out a deep sigh. “Oh yes, and I'm sure we'll see much more of them now that that George fellow is in charge. Mark my words, he's a dictator in the making. I've seen it happen before, you see. That's why we had to flee from Hustan, hoping to find freedom here.”

Hustan was a collectivist republic to the north west of Gothgoria, a country with a decidedly chequered past and an uncertain future.

“Out of the frying pan and into the fire, as the saying goes,” she sighed. “And yet, I guess we can't complain. Looking on the bright side, we've had twenty years of peace. And come next Thursday we'll have had fifty years of wonderful marriage.”

“Congratulations!” he beamed at her.

“If we were younger, we might move again. Perhaps the Freelands would have taken us in, if only to allow us free passage to the Outlands. With the exception of the wars, which sucked everybody in, there's seldom any trouble there. But we're getting

on, you know, and I'm not sure we could weather the move, even if they'd still have us."

"Yes, I'm told that the Freelanders have really tightened up on immigration, these last few years," he nodded. "The border with the Outlands is pretty much closed, or at least almost exclusively one way. I thought of moving there myself after finishing college, but I gather that obtaining the necessary work permit is a devil of a job."

"Anyhow," he smiled, taking his change and tobacco, "I wish you well. And if there's any trouble and you need help, just let me know. I'm only a stone's throw away."

"Thank you and take care." the lady beamed back at him. "And don't smoke that tobacco all at once. Heaven knows if or when we'll be able to fresh supplies, even if people still have the money to pay for it. I can see folk eating in charity soup kitchens and going back to simple barter before long."

Wow, that really did bring him down to earth. He hadn't been thinking past the end of his nose. "I'll bear that in mind. And you take care, too, Missus Gregore."

As he turned to leave, he nearly bumped into a figure who must have just entered the shop behind him. He quickly took in the situation. There were three of them there and they wore the dark green shirts of the Patriotic Workers' Freedom Party's Youth Brigade. They were spotty faced and gangly and couldn't have been older than fourteen or fifteen.

The group pushed past him and fanned out around the shop, toying with the goods, then one of them went up to the counter and demanded an ounce of tobacco, without so much as a please or thank you.

Randal turned back round to face the counter and stood there to make sure they didn't give Missus Gregore a hard time.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not allowed to sell tobacco to minors," Missus Gregore told the lad.

At this point, the stand bearing sweets and chocolates which stood on the counter clattered to the floor, spilling its contents in every direction.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear," one of the youths leered. "I'm so clumsy."

"Perhaps you didn't hear me, Missus. You should get a

hearing aid. I said I want an ounce of Clam. Now are you going to give it to me?"

"Oy!" shouted Randal, trying to look menacing. "Why don't you three just bugger off and leave the lady alone?"

The three of them turned to face Randal and look him up and down with the same disdain that they'd shown Missus Gregore.

"Oh yeah? And who the hell are you, eh? Whatcha gonna do about it, eh?"

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he barked. "If you're not out of here in two minutes, I'm going to call the police."

One of the youths shook his head and sneered. "Listen, pop. There's something you need to know." The lad turned his arm and patted the shield and sword insignia on his sleeve. "Since ten o'clock this morning, when Lucian came to power – All hail to Lucian! – we *are* the police. So you'd better get used to it, pop ... if you know what's good for you."

Lucian must be Bradley George's middle name.

Randal pocketed his tobacco and made a show of rolling up his shirt sleeves.

"Here!" Missus Gregore gasped in alarm, taking a pouch of tobacco from behind the counter and tossing it on the counter. "Take it and get out of here."

The youths turned back to her.

"Good, at least the old maggot here has got some sense," one of them smirked, snatching up the tobacco. "But wait a minute ... what about my cigarette papers and matches? What do you think I do: chew the stuff and spit it out on the street like an effin' Yun?"

She fetched the items and thrust them toward him and the three of them turned to leave.

"We'll be back," the youth said on the way out. "And as for you, pop, you'd better watch out. I never forget a face, effin' Yun Lover." He raised an arm and stuck his index finger out like the barrel of a gun. "Click" he went, wagging his thumb as if firing the weapon, then put his finger to his mouth and blew, as if blowing the smoke from the barrel.

When they'd gone, Randal turned back to her. "I'm so sorry about that. I hope I haven't made matters worse ..." He knelt down and picked up the sweet stand, returning it to the counter and making a start on retrieving the contents.

She shook her head. “No, no. Thank you. I'm glad you were here, if only to see what these animals are like. Never mind those: I'll clear them up. Now off you go, young man, before they change their minds about you. And stay safe.”

As he left the shop and walked back down the cobbled street, Randal saw the youths again. They were just coming out of Wiggins' butcher's shop and were stuffing their faces with what looked like pork pies, which they'd probably demanded with similar menaces, or simply helped themselves.

He waited until the youths were further up the street, then crossed the road and made for the shop. Well, at first sight the place looked okay.

“Hello,” he called as he entered the shop. He looked around but the shop appeared unattended. “Hello?”

Hearing faint sobs, Randal peered over the counter and saw Heléna crouching there, with her face in her hands, clearly distressed. He lifted the flap in the counter and went behind to see what was the matter – though you didn't have to be a genius to work that one out – and to comfort her.

“What's the matter?” he asked Heléna, kneeling down beside her and putting his hand tentatively on her shoulder. She pulled her hands away and looked so mournfully into his eyes; then clutched tight hold of him.

Randal put his arms around Heléna and gently pulled her to a standing position. Raising her lowered head with the tips of his fingers under her chin, and thrilling at the texture of her immaculate olive skin, he asked again.

“What's troubling you, Heléna? You can tell me. I'm a friend.”

“The Green Shirts,” she admitted at length. “Today they came and just stole a few pork pies. But they told me that they'd be willing to offer protection for ten shillings a week. They said to talk it over with Mama and Papa and that they'd be back.”

“Protection?”

“They said that if we paid ten shillings to them each week, that they would protect the shop from further vandalism. I mean, where are we going to get an extra ten shillings from? Things are bad enough as it is.”

“And if you don't?”

“That they and their friends would be back to make an example of us, so that others might see the benefits of paying for protection.”

“They threatened to vandalize the shop?”

Heléna peered into his eyes, then looked away quickly, as if embarrassed at the sight of him so close to her, peering back. “Yes, that's what I took them to mean. And it's possible that they would not stop at mere vandalism. But what are we to do? We are just simple folk.”

She pulled away from him and went to blow her nose on a handkerchief she had tucked up the sleeve of her blouse.

Randal tore a piece off one of the sheets of paper in which they wrapped the meat, took out his pen and scribbled down his name and address before handing the paper to her. “Keep this safe,” he advised her. “It's my name and address – just down the road not far from here, above the ironmonger's. If ever you are in trouble or in danger, you know where I am.”

Heléna scanned the words and thrust the note inside her purse.

“Promise?”

She looked searchingly in his eyes, nodded silently, and again – perhaps feeling uncomfortable, broke her gaze.

“Thank you, Randal,” she replied at length, clearing her throat.

“Promise?”

“Yes, of course, I promise. And thank you.”

“Good,” he smiled.

Heléna made an effort to pull herself together. “Did you want something today?”

“No, I just saw the youths leaving the shop and I came here to check you were all right. But now I'm here, I could do with half a dozen pork sausages, if you're feeling up to serving?”

“Sure,” she nodded and went to cut the sausages from the long string hanging in the window. She was still visibly shaken.

He rummaged in his pocket for some change, but she shook her head. “It's on the house.”

“No, really, I must pay for the meat,” he protested.

“I'm sure that my Mama and Papa would want you to have the sausages 'on the house.’”

“Really, I'd rather pay. It's only right. But thank you all the same.”

She smiled and shook her head. “I can see that I'm not going to be able to change your mind,” she laughed, perking up at length. “Very well, if you insist.

“I'll get you some day, though,” she smiled.

“Buy me a drink sometime, Heléna.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Are you asking me out on a date?” Then she appeared to have second thoughts and cast her eyes down, as if she felt in some way unworthy.

“Ah, well ...” Now that took him quite by surprise. “Well, if you put it that way ...”

“Well?”

It was his turn to become all coy. “Yes, if that's what you want. Would you like to go out for a drink with me?”

“All right, yes, Randal. When would it suit you?”

“Whenever it would suit you.”

“Really?” she questioned. “Do you mean that?”

Heléna was a more complex character than Randal had first thought. He'd taken her to be quite confidant and outgoing, and yet the poor dear seemed so uncertain of herself and vulnerable at times. He realized that he shouldn't toy with her affections, lest she take it the wrong way.

“Really, Heléna. Nothing would give me greater pleasure.”

“This could go on forever,” she laughed. “I enjoy chivalry, but much prefer a man to be decisive. Name a day. Any day: my social diary's free. So free, in fact, that I don't need a diary.”

“Mine, too,” he nodded, without having to consult his diary, which was totally empty. Why he lashed out every year on a diary to record the odd appointment or telephone number, heaven only knew.

“How about tonight, bearing in mind that the curfew begins at nine?”

Rumour had it that the military wanted the curfew to begin at dusk and last until dawn, but that the much-beleaguered Treasury, which derived a significant income from the sale of alcohol – hectoring by the powerful drinks industry and licensed victuallers who had a powerful lobby in Parliament – had suggested this later time, at least through the summer months. Come autumn, as the

days grew shorter and the nights longer, the time of curfew would be brought forward accordingly.

“Okay. We'd better make it early then. How does six o'clock suit you?”

“Ah ... we have dinner at five thirty. That won't leave much time”

“Why not make it five thirty then, and we'll eat out. *The Tap and Spile* serve decent food at a reasonable price.”

“Five thirty it is, then,” she beamed back at him.

“Do you live above the shop?”

“Yes. Not the shop door, though,” she nodded, waving her arm to show him the directions: “The door to the flat is through the archway between the shops.”

“Got that, Heléna. Okay, then, I'll meet you here, or there, well you know what I mean.”

“Good, can't wait. And should I get dressed up?” she enquired.

“Smart casual, maybe?” He looked at his watch. “No offence, but I have to dash. I need to make an appointment at the Labour Exchange.”

“None taken, Randal. See you soon.” Then, as an afterthought: “Ring the bell three times, then we'll know that it's a friend.”

There was a serious edge to Heléna's voice as she said those words. Fear was never far from these people's lives; it was perhaps always there, hovering in the periphery.

Well, that was certainly an unexpected and delightful turn out for the books, Randal smiled, as he fair skipped off down the road. Thank you, God. I know that I've neglected you of late, but I love you really.

7. An evening on the town

A scrawled note pinned to the door of *The Tap and Spile* confirmed the earlier rumours:

“Due to curfew restrictions, last orders will be called at eight o'clock and the pub will close at eight thirty on the dot. This will allow customers sufficient time to make their way safely home by nine when the curfew begins.

“Any cooked food required must be ordered by seven o'clock at the latest and consumed by eight fifteen.

“For those unable or unwilling to make the journey home, bed and breakfast is available for two shillings and sixpence per person per night.

“The Management apologize for this inconvenience and trust that it will not spoil your enjoyment.”

Oh well, at least they had a couple of hours in which to enjoy themselves and get to know one-another a little better, and who knows where this first date might lead?

After getting a round of drinks in, they ordered food early and sat at a small table in a bay window looking out onto the beer garden at the rear of the pub.

All around them, the talk was focussed on the imposition of martial law. Randal had expected fierce opposition, and yet it appeared that most folk welcomed the intervention, praying that the new regime would be able to pull the country out of the mire.

As for him, he only had eyes for Heléna. She looked attractive enough in her workaday clothes at the butcher's. But tonight, wearing a black dress, delicately embroidered with silver thread, stretching down from her fine, bare shoulders, tucked in at her slender waist, to end a couple of inches above her knees and revealing just a hint of smooth olive cleavage and black stocking, she was fetching. More than that, though, was her jovial nature and her radiance. And even more than that, being close to her, there was something catching in the air – an aura, perhaps? – which was both exhilarating and empowering. Not only did she possess quality, she willingly shared it.

“Love is like a bottomless, magic purse,” she informed him,

as if she'd plucked his thoughts out of the air between them. "The more you give, the more you receive and the more you have to give. My people call this the hidden economy. And yet, failing to understand this dynamic principle and treating it like some common commodity which they might own or barter to their personal advantage, people will try to buy people's love, or be frugal and vainly attempt to hoard it."

Heléna was quite a philosopher on the quiet.

She wanted to know all about him, of course, and he talked for a time about his childhood and reckless adolescence, and – without bamboozling her with unnecessary jargon – he told her about his work. And the current lack thereof.

"But enough about me," Randal smiled, as the waiter arrived bearing his hot chilli and Heléna's roast chicken and salad.

He nodded to the waiter and thanked him as the man carefully laid the plates before them. "*Jelo maloochi*," the man bowed.

Randal didn't quite catch that and looked to Heléna for assistance.

"*Jelo maloochi*: it's Yardi, which is a dialect spoken in the south of Kronstein. It means 'enjoy your meal,'" she explained and nodded in appreciation at the waiter. "Thank you, I'm sure we will."

Funny, looking at the man you'd have taken him for a Gothgorian, born and bred.

"Oh, and before you go, I see you have Lagoche on your wine list. Could we have a couple of large glasses, please? You'll simply adore the wine, Randal."

"Certainly, madam."

Randal was very much a beer man, but he was willing to give anything a go.

"As I was saying, we didn't come here to bore you silly with all that technical stuff. What about you, Heléna? Please, tell me about yourself."

Then, whilst he was still mulling it over in his mind: "Kronstein?"

"The folk around here call it Yonder: the land beyond Dravine."

Dravine was hundreds of miles away to the west of

Gothgoria, about as out of the way as you could get.

"This is where my family originate," she told him, "though my grandmother and grandfather settled here during the time of unrest prior to the outbreak of the First Great War.

"What do you know of Dravine?" she asked him.

"Little to nothing," he had to admit. "Enlighten me."

"It's a land famed for the bounty of its orchards and lush green pastures, Randal. And – according to literature and folklore – not least for its fervent lovers. Did you know that without them, they might never have thought of such wonderful innovations as chivalry and romantic love here in the Mid-West?"

"That's news to me," he replied, tucking into his chilli and taking a sip of his wine when it arrived. "Hey, you know, that's really quite moreish. Thank you, Heléna, that was a very good choice on your part."

"I haven't tasted that in years," she smiled, taking a sip of her own. "Before he left Dravine, grandfather had an orchard and he used to make Lagoche. He had a go at brewing it here, too, when he first arrived, hoping that he might set up in business again. But that was not to be. He said that sadly you couldn't get decent fruit and suitable yeast over here, and in those days it was difficult to persuade beer-swilling folk to try something new: they were very set in their ways."

"You know, I always thought Dravine sounded such a backward place. I had no idea, Heléna."

"Sadly, with the rise of the religious fundamentalists who've had a stranglehold over the country in the last fifty or so years, it has become more and more backward and insular. The country is going through what my Uncle – who still lives there – calls the Dark Age. But this wasn't always the case. Once upon a time Dravine earned world renown as a seat of great learning and of openness and tolerance. Is that the word I'm looking for? No, not so much begrudgingly tolerant as actively welcoming. Yes, welcoming.

"While folk around the Mid-West were going around with bows and arrows and dressed in animal skins, Dravine had schools and vast libraries of wisdom collected from the farthest reaches of the world. They called that period, which lasted for over eight hundred years, 'The Enlightenment.'"

“That's sad,” he said, shaking his head.

Heléna was more upbeat. “There's no cause for despair, Randal. As the wise saying has it: 'This, too, shall pass.'”

He thought about that for a minute. “Belief in that adage would require an inordinate amount of patience, or detachment It might certainly be true in the long term, but day to day, in times like these, it's hard to believe that things will get better.

“Anyhow, tell me more about you, Heléna. What makes you tick and what turns you on?”

“Why, you do, Randal,” Heléna chirped, gently rubbing her foot up his shin.

“No, seriously.”

She smiled and began to recite in lilting tones:

*“Let me drink in the wonder
and resplendence of your Garden, Friend,
Such welcome respite from
the lesser cares of the daily grind.”*

A delicious shimmer passed through Randal and the hairs on his arms stood on end. It was a moment of real contact.

“I like reading poetry and listening to music,” she told him. “I play the *zabat* – it's a traditional instrument rather like the guitar, though with a smaller body. It's rounded rather than having an angular body. I enjoy meeting and helping people – ordinary, everyday, sentient folk like you and me, and I enjoy good conversation. I even quite enjoy simply sitting by the fireside knitting away. There's something special and satisfying about being able to create things, even if it's only a pair of mittens or a woollen jersey.

“Maybe some day I'll get married and have children. My mama and papa began dropping hints about that possibility once I'd celebrated my eighteenth birthday and come of age.”

“Really? I took you to be in your early twenties like me, Heléna.”

“Yes, a lot of people take me to be a little older than I am. I'll turn nineteen later this year.”

“I thought that in places like Dravine marriages were arranged by the parents?”

“In Dravine itself, they certainly were and still are. That possibility has been raised a time or two. Every now and again,

my mama will contact some distant relative and arrange for me to meet some eligible bachelor. Thus far, however, I've managed to avoid this fate. And I've told them, with respect, that when the time is right I'll marry, and that it will be to someone of my own choosing."

"I bet that went down like a lead balloon."

"Ah, times are changing, and my parents are good-natured and easy-going folk. And they realize that things operate differently in Gothgoria than they do back home."

That was good to hear. "Did you tell them about your date with me?" he wondered. "How did they take that news?"

"My dear mama and papa know that I have good sense and good taste and they trust me. So as long as I am happy and successful, they're happy. And the converse. There was no question of an inquisition, nor of them imposing their own curfew on me.

"They did say they'd like to meet you, over High Tea – you know, salmon and watercress sandwiches, all the best crockery and tea in tiny china teacups," she laughed. "Of course, I told them it was early days as yet."

Of course ... more's the pity.

Again he felt a thrill went through him as he felt Heléna's stockinged foot touch his leg, and more than once. Surreptitiously peering under the table, he noticed that she'd slipped her sandals off and she was gently stroking her toes up and down his shin, quite absent-mindedly.

Not only was Heléna stimulating on an intellectual level, she being an olive-skinned beauty and he an admittedly hot-bloodied man, even in this simple and subtle way, she was indeed stimulating on an emotional level. Dare he say it? Yes, and on a sexual level. And they hadn't even hugged one-another or kissed as yet.

"Hey, hey! Fancy seeing you here!"

Abruptly his reverie was broken as a hand clapped him on the back. A little startled, he turned to see Dave there. He must have just entered the pub and crept up on them.

"I'm Dave," he introduced himself, grabbing hold of Heléna's hand and pumping it up and down. "I'm an old friend of Randy's. We went to school together, many moons ago."

“Anyhow, see you in a minute. The beer's running straight through me and I have to point Percy at porcelain, then I need to get a drink in before they call next orders. Can I get you a drink?”

They politely declined and Randal was on the point of suggesting that they buy Dave a drink, but Dave was already off, heading for the loos.

“Randy?” Heléna teased him, raising her eyebrows.

“Don't ask,” he said shaking his head. “If you'll excuse me for a moment, it's my turn to buy Dave a drink, so I'll just pop to the bar and get one in for him.”

“Right you are. I'll stay here and look after the seats, then I have to pay a call myself.”

“Yes, squire?” the landlord asked, as he pulled out his purse and scanned the pumps for Dave's favourite tippie. “A pint of your best, please; a large glass of Lagoche, and a pint of Sheep Dip.”

“Certainly, squire.”

The landlord went away down the bar and began to pull the pints, his sleeves rolled up and his muscles bulging with the effort.

“Thank you, squire, that'll be one shilling and eight pence halfpenny.”

Randal handed him some coins and looked at the beers. “Sorry, which was the Sheep Dip?” The pints looked the same to him and he'd failed to register which had come from which pump.

The landlord peered at one, then the other, then tapped the pint on his left. “That's the Sheep Dip,” he said. “And that one is the Best.”

“Many thanks.”

Randal took the glass of wine and returned to the table to give that to Heléna first, then went back to the bar for the beers.

The landlord looked around furtively and motioned to Randal. “A quiet word, if I may, squire.” He waited as another of the regulars passed the bar and returned to his seat. “Personally I have nothing against Yonderers, but a word to the wise”

Catching the landlord's drift immediately, Randal's face reddened.

“These are difficult times we live it,” the landlord continued. “A lot of my custom comes from the Patriotic Workers, you see.

Beggars can't be choosers, as they say. They hold their meetings here twice and sometimes three times a week, and that's custom that we can't afford to lose these days."

"I see."

"So I don't want to upset them. And neither do I wish you and your good lady to come to any harm, squire."

"So"

"So, perhaps once you've drunk up, you might leave quietly. Most of them are gathered in the front bar, so perhaps if you left through the beer garden? There's no immediate rush, of course: take your time with your drinks.

"This is just a word to the wise, you understand."

"Quite. Thank you, sir," responded Randal, a lump growing in his throat and his legs feeling a little rubbery. He grasped hold of the beers and returned to his seat.

"What was that about?" Heléna wondered as he returned. "Oh, just small talk," Randal lied. "I'll tell you later."

"Was it about me?" she wanted to know. My, she was sharp.

"Why do you ask?"

"We've been getting a few funny looks from the regulars here. And I think it's probably because of me."

"I'm sorry, my love, I hadn't noticed. I've been so engrossed in your delightful company. But don't worry. Just drink your drink, without rushing it, then we'll leave by the garden gate."

Dave came back from the loos and sat down with them, taking a deep swig of his beer. "Thanks, mate."

Someone across the bar caught his attention. "Hang on, be back in a bit, there's someone I need to see first."

Five minutes later, Dave was back. Peering over Randal's shoulder to make sure he wasn't being watched, he whispered a warning. "The natives are restless."

"So I gather. The landlord said much the same thing. Should we drink up and leave?"

Dave shook his head. "No, just carry on as normal. I know some of them and I've had a word on your behalf."

"What did you say to them?" Randal wanted to know.

"I told them you were one of us, but working undercover."

"One of us?"

Dave unzipped his jacket a little and Randal saw the dark

green collar of his shirt. Now that was a real shocker.

“Don't worry, I'll look after you. I won't let politics stand between old friends. Blood's thicker than water, and all that shit. And I'm actually quite high up in the Intelligence Corps, so I'm hoping I've convinced them to stay clear.”

What to do? To say bravo, to weep, or to puke?

“Thanks, Dave, it's appreciated. It's a good thing you came along. You know, you've got a natural gift for being in the right place at the right time.”

“That's what friends are for,” Dave smiled, lighting up a rollie.

As for Heléna, her former jollity had suddenly evaporated, and Randal exchanged glances with her and discreetly passed her coat. “I think it's time we left.”

She nodded her agreement.

“I'll walk you home,” Dave suggested, as Heléna was heading for the door into the garden.

“If it's all right with you, Dave, I'd like to spend some time alone with Heléna.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, I'm sure.”

Dave shrugged. “Okay, stay safe. Catch you later, mate. You, too, Heléna. Been nice meeting you.”

Randal had to gallop down the street to catch up with Heléna. She was not a happy bunny and it took some time to convince her that everything was going to be all right. He was in two minds about Dave, who'd been a good friend to him for so long, but Randal did feel the need to distance himself from the guy, and above all spell that out to Heléna.

At length she calmed down and cast off her gloom and worries like a thick fleece in spring, and they walked arm in arm through town and back toward her place. They kissed briefly underneath the archway beside the shop, then she turned and left and he waited there until she was safely inside.

It was only later that Randal realized that not only had he forgotten to exchange telephone numbers with her, nor had they set a time and place for a second date. Could be, he pondered, that he'd blown his chances that night and that she'd been too polite to say so. What an idiot.

8. A stroll in the park

The next morning, as he was passing by on the way to the newsagent's, Randal noticed that Heléna was at work in the shop. He could hear a steady *chop-chop-chop* coming from the back of the premises which was probably her father preparing meat, but it looked like she was alone. Sucking in his breath and muttering a silent prayer to whatever benevolent being might be listening, he turned on his heel, walked back and entered the shop.

Thankfully, Randal's fears proved unfounded. When Heléna caught sight of him, her features instantly broke into a broad smile and she greeted him warmly.

"Papa?" she called through to the back. "Can you look after the shop for five minutes? Pretty please?"

The old man came into the shop, wiping his hands on a bloody rag. Seeing Randal there, he too, greeted him warmly. Then a thought occurred to him. "Why don't you take the morning off, my precious. It's too fine a day to be stuck inside minding a shop for one so young. Why don't you go for a walk with your young gentleman friend?"

"Really?"

"Really. 'Your need is greater than mine', as the wise old saw has it."

"Really!"

"Really. I'm perfectly capable of minding the shop, precious. If I'm in need, I can always ring the bell and summon your dear Mama."

Taking off her apron, she went over to the old man and gave him a big kiss on the cheek. "Oh, thank you, Papa. I'll be back to take over at twelve."

"One o'clock would be soon enough. Now off you go and get changed and don't keep your gentleman friend waiting. And enjoy yourselves."

Heléna caught hold of Randal's hand and dragged him – though not at all unwillingly – from the shop and through the archway to the flat door.

"Should I wait here?"

Heléna shook her head. “There's no *should* about it, Randal,” she informed him. “The world is altogether too full of 'You should do this' and 'You should do that'. It's judgemental; the kind of thing that a critical parent would say.”

“Sorry,” he replied sheepishly. “Then, shall I wait here?”

“No, no.” Heléna grabbed hold of his hand and eagerly pulled him in through the doorway. “Don't stand on ceremony, come on up.”

They clambered up the wide carpeted stairs until they reached the flat above. Heléna's mother was there and after officially introducing Randal and explaining her father's suggestion, Heléna went through to her bedroom to change, leaving her mother and Randal to make conversation in the lounge.

Compared to his own seedy flat, this place was a palace, full of rich and exotic furnishings and paraphernalia that must have been in the family for generations.

Under such circumstances, Randal's conversation usually dried up and left him feeling awkward and embarrassed, but he found Missus Wiggins a delight and she more than made up for his shortcomings.

When Heléna emerged, looking as radiant as the night before, her mother apologized, suddenly realizing that she hadn't offered them tea and something to eat, but Heléna reassured her that they had to be off, and promised to allow her to entertain on another occasion, and the old lady seemed pleased enough at that. Putting on her apron, Heléna's mother followed them downstairs, bade them “*Ti Cheedi*” – enjoy yourselves – and headed for the shop to help her husband.

It was a glorious day out, with barely a cloud in the azure-blue sky. Without time to prepare a picnic, they headed instead for the local baker's shop and picked up some sandwiches and soft drinks, then headed toward the local park. They hadn't mown the grass in a while and it was quite long, lush and liberally speckled with daisies and the odd bluebell and buttercup. There was a bandstand in the park and some days in the summer they played music. If they did, then it meant paying threepence to enter the park, but it was generally money well spent.

They had a wonderful time in the park that morning, walking

through the gardens; sitting in the sun; munching on their sandwiches and later feeding the ducks – simple pleasures without any purpose other than to enjoy one-another's company, really.

It was fortunate for them that they entered the park earlier that morning, for as they passed back through the wrought iron gates, Randal happened to see that someone had tied a sheet of cardboard on the railings, on which were scrawled the words “*Goths only*”, which was a shorthand way of saying “for native Gothgorians only.”

He had hoped that Heléna would not see the notice, but she had; so he stalked up to the railings, yanked the notice free, tore it to shreds and dutifully cast the pieces into a nearby bin.

An elderly lady sitting at a nearby bench broke into spontaneous applause. “Bravo, bravo!” she called, shaking her walking stick in the air. “Somebody has to stand up to these thugs.”

Nevertheless, he and Heléna hurried away from the park and back toward the shop. Neither of them were feeling that brave.

9. The nights draw in

That summer seemed to pass so quickly. Randal saw something of Heléna most days and they went out perhaps three or four times a week, getting to know one-another quite well in this time. And when he wasn't with Heléna, he was wishing the time away. Before he knew it, summer was over and slowly but surely the nights began to draw in earlier and earlier. And as the nights drew in, so the curfew – which now ran from dusk to dawn – encroached more and more on their pleasures.

He'd been to “High Tea” with Heléna's Mama and Papa, something he'd dreaded for days beforehand. But in the event he needn't have worried. All three of them: Heléna, her mother and her father all went out of their way to make him feel welcome and comfortable.

Come the autumn, the Patriotic Workers' Freedom Party were feeling more confident that the people would support new measures they had been planning to introduce. One of the first things they had done, in the Summer, had been to conduct a census. In amongst the many questions on the lengthy form – which included useless information like hair and eye colour, as if such superficialities mattered one jot – were those concerning ethnic origin.

Not only did they want to know about the nationality of the subject filling out the form, they wanted to know about the subject's parents and grandparents (as well as details of siblings, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews). There was no room for ifs and buts on the form, the choice was quite simple: having answered questions about these relatives, if more than one out of the four grandparents was of Outlandish or Dravinic origin, then you were given no other option than to tick a box labelled “Mixed or inferior race (*registration and further investigation required, see Note 7 below and complete Section 3*).”

Of course, this didn't apply to Randal. He was Gothgorian born and bred, but scanning through the notes it most certainly did apply to Heléna and her parents. He had a flick through Section 3 and saw that the questions the authorities were asking

concerned such things as physical or mental capabilities and incapacity and also current employment and any special skills the subject might possess. It looked like the authorities wanted to sort the wheat from the chaff. As for the wheat, perhaps the intention was to put these folk to good use in the current crisis. But as for the chaff? The ones who had some infirmity or incapacity or had no useful skills. What was to be their fate?

And even he, a Gothgorian national, had to be careful what he wrote, for there were probing questions about physical and mental diseases that might have been passed on down the generations.

The following Wednesday, since she fell into that catch-all category of “mixed or inferior race”, Heléna and her parents had to go along to register with the Department of Cultural Hygiene, another of Lucian's sick innovations. Though Dave had strongly advised against it, Randal went along to offer his moral support. He was allowed as far as the lobby, but was prevented by ushers from venturing any further.

Three hours later, having to join long queues again and again for interviews, tests and the most intimate physical examinations, the three finally emerged. Heléna's parents were ashen faced, though Heléna was putting on a brave face and being strong on their behalf. Randal was glad to see that she'd managed to handle what must have been an awful ordeal.

“Oh, thanks for waiting, Randal,” Heléna smiled, giving him an affectionate kiss on the lips. “You didn't have to, but you're such a dear.”

“It's my pleasure. So, what did you get for your pains?” he asked.

Her parents momentarily distracted, she closed her eyes and heaved a deep sigh. “Well, they made a lot of notes and though they asked a thousand and one questions, they were singularly unforthcoming when it came to answering our questions. And some of them were damn right rude. It was as if they were dealing with cattle rather than human beings.”

“You know, they measured everything. They must be obsessed with detail. They even measured the length of my ears.”

One minor detail that Randal had noticed about Heléna's kin was that they had slightly pointy ears, and of course they were

quite petite, like the elves you see in children's story books, though of course not nearly as pronounced as in these caricatures. Who knows, perhaps the origins lay in the Dravinians who must have seemed strange, perhaps even magical, to outsiders?

"They did give each of us one of these," Heléna said as they quickly left the green and grey interior of the Department of Cultural Hygiene. She passed him a small, leather bound booklet. It consisted of some kind of identity card with two photographs, one taken from the front and the other from the side, with a large numbered card held up to her chest – yes, the sort of mug shot you received having been arrested for a criminal offence.

On the page facing were such sundry items as age and place of residence and also a rather stark ethnic classification: "*Inferior race (Dravinic, 4/4).*" Presumably 4/4 referred to the fact that all four grandparents were of Dravinic origin.

It looked like further pages in the document, which were currently blank, were reserved for such items as travel permits.

"So what now?" he asked, handing the document back to her.

"Now I suggest we adjourn to the flat," suggested Heléna's mother, Elizabeth. "Time for a nice hot cup of tea."

If ever there was a crisis, the teapot would come out, Randal mused. They were pragmatic and patient people.

"Mama, I think perhaps on this occasion we might have a good stiff drink," countered her father with a mischievous glint in his eye. "What say you, Randal?"

He nodded.

"It's agreed then."

"But what about the shop?" Heléna's mother enquired.

"I think they'll forgive us taking a half day off, don't you? Let's open bright and early tomorrow morning."

"Yes, and I suppose I'd better get out my needle and thread," the lady sighed.

"Needle and thread?"

Heléna dug in her pocket and produced a bright red object wrapped in clear cellophane.

"What on earth's that?" he asked her.

"Something that we are required to sew onto our coats and our everyday clothes and wear, so that others may see our 'inferior racial origins'", she told him. Ripping the packet apart,

she showed him the bright red circles of coarse cloth. Each bore the numeral “4” in bright yellow dye. “We were told in no uncertain terms that ‘refusal to comply constitutes a serious criminal offence punishable by six months hard labour.’”

“If we live that long, judging by the way things are going ...” Elizabeth interjected, taking a lace handkerchief out and wiping away the tears that had begun to stream down her face.

Heléna comforted her. “Now, now, Mama, you mustn’t think such things and worry yourself so. I’m sure everything will turn out right.”

Raimond was shaking his head in despair and he had a haunted look in his eye. “My grandfather spoke of such things,” he told them. “I was only a young child, then, scarcely out of nappies, and I did not understand what he was saying.

“But I remember his words and I understand them now. My grandfather lived through times such as these; dark and terrible times, dark and terrible times, so he said. He warned us to stay ever vigilant, for people have short memories, lessons are soon forgotten and history has a habit of repeating itself.

“You mark my words, Heléna,” her Papa continued, and he sounded uncharacteristically fierce: “These are vicious, psychopathic animals we are dealing with. They are up to no good. No good will come of them. No good at all.”

Shortly after that, having submitted a small photograph to the Department of Cultural Hygiene, though without the need to submit to any kind of examination, Randal received his own identification card in the post. It was marked “Gothgorian national 4/4, Class B3”, whatever that meant. Probably that though he was pure bred Gothgorian, he was of a lowly social standing and level of skill.

The people at the ministry had asked him if he was a party member and when invited to join, he’d politely declined, which hadn’t gone down particularly well with them. No doubt before long, he would not be given the option but – like it or lump it – would simply be conscripted. If that ever did happen, then he’d be out of the country before you could say “Jack Robinson.”

10. Sad departures

One possible answer to the question of the fate of society's "chaff" came sometime later when the Enforced Repatriation Bill came before Parliament. There'd been a ruthless purge of the more vocal dissidents by this time and the bill was passed with little dissension, and quickly entered the statute books.

There were few telephones in the Outlands and in far-flung places like Dravine, and letters – if they arrived at all – took months to reach their destination. In the case of the latter, Heléna told Randal, it was almost impossible to communicate these days. Since they were installed in office, the Patriotic Workers' Freedom Party had set up the Department of Information and it seemed that one of their chief occupations, other than the dissemination of propaganda, was the monitoring and censorship of mail and the media.

Heléna's Uncle Albert, a dear old soul and veteran of the Second Great War who'd been left constantly breathless after being gassed in the trenches, had been one of the first to face enforced repatriation.

One day a dark green army bus had arrived at his door, having been touring the area picking up passengers. For some bizarre reason, the bus's windows were painted over with gay caricatures of happy smiling people: the vision of the Party that the regime wished to project. People who were delighted to be serving their nation. They'd stood there and waved him on his way that fateful morning, not that he would have been able to see through the painted windows. And that was the last they saw of him.

That was six months ago and yet still there had been no word from family to let them know that Uncle Albert had safely arrived back home. And he was by no means the exception. What had at first been a monitoring and censorship of foreign mail now appeared to be a complete news blackout.



After a long, hard winter – the worst in living memory, with unwashed and emaciated urchins in rags begging openly on the

streets – folk were feeling a little more upbeat again, so glad to see the returning sun of spring; hoping and praying that this might be some sign that at long last the deep economic depression might also begin to lift.

Money was scarce and essential food items were rationed, which was both a good thing and a bad thing for Heléna's parents. The scarcity of money meant that people were looking for cheaper cuts of meat, since they could buy more of that with their ration coupons – indeed, the Wiggins' were by now selling more horse meat than anything, which had been frowned upon before the depression set in – but this also meant that the butchers made less profit. And the good thing was that at least those coupons could only be used to buy meat, so at least the family still had that trade. Of course, being butchers and having something with which to barter amongst the other traders, though they were undoubtedly going through hard times, at least they always had food on their own table.

Randal still hadn't found a decent job, and didn't at all expect that he would, given the current state of dis-economy; but over the winter he'd managed to find quite a bit of temporary work and this had kept the wolves from his door. At first he'd found the work menial and soul destroying, but with Heléna's help he'd come to realize that his suffering didn't come so much from the nature of the work itself but from his own quite unnecessary attitude toward it and an unrealistic sense that, being intelligent, he was somehow entitled to a better or more favoured life. Once he'd dropped that attitude and simply got on with the job, be it peeling potatoes or washing dishes or swabbing out the public toilets, and saw it as simply a means to an end, life became a lot more tolerable for him.

Randal and Heléna were just returning from town one day after buying in provisions and turned onto the high-street.

The first thing they saw was a pair of Green Shirts, who all seemed to be armed now, with the exception of those still in the Youth Brigade who carried only camping knives. These shaven-headed thugs were going from door to door, one armed with a clipboard which he kept consulting, the other armed with a pot of red paint and a brush. And every few houses or businesses, they'd stop and daub a blood-red mark on the door. For what reason, he

and Heléna could only guess, but dark thoughts did cross their mind.

Still, there was nothing the two of them could do about it, so they crossed the road and walked on. Again they noticed the red marks on so many of the doors on their side of the street which must have been left whilst they were out shopping.

They stopped outside the flat whilst Heléna fished in her pocket for the keys. It came as no surprise to them to find a similar red mark on the door to the apartment. Now that *was* deeply worrying.

Randal could do with getting back to his own flat to see if any replies had arrived following a recent spate of job applications, but something told him that perhaps he should stick around to make sure nothing untoward happened. Though he tried not to show it and to remain upbeat, Randal was deeply worried for Heléna and for Elizabeth and Raimond. Perhaps especially for Elizabeth and Raimond.

Later that afternoon, a convoy of army trucks arrived. There were no sirens, but their blue lights were flashing. And when they'd passed – as Randal could clearly see through the bay window of the flat, which stood out into the street – other soldiers unfurled a menacing stretch of coiled barbed wire across the road and pavements, to bar the way.

Sensing danger, Elizabeth and Raimond had locked up the shop and come upstairs now, and they all took turns watching as the scene began to unfold. The trucks were not empty but full of rather worried looking people. Every so often, two or three of the soldiers would go to a door and knock. If the door failed to open, then they'd bring up a ram and batter it down to gain entrance.

The occupants were then lined up on the street whilst one or other of what looked like officials, dressed in black suits and dark green shirts, consulted a clipboard. Some, mostly the younger occupants, were sent back inside. Then a signal would be made and soldiers on the trucks would shepherd perhaps half a dozen or more of the frightened people off a nearby truck and into the house. It looked as if they were shipping people in and billeting them in the houses and businesses.

But as for the others who'd been taken from their houses – largely the old and infirm – they were manhandled into the back

of the open-topped trucks, like cattle in pens to be sent for slaughter. And as these trucks filled, so they drove off and the barbed wire was drawn back to allow the trucks to pass.

A white haired old man from a house opposite the flat was determined not to go. He was waving his walking stick menacingly and cursing the soldiers.

One of the officials in the black suits calmly walked up to the old man, tearing the walking stick from his hand. Then he proceeded to hit the old man with the stick, again and again and again until the old man was down on his knees. But still he did not stop.

Heléna cried out and turned to Randal, to bury her head in his chest, in a flood of tears. Words failed Randal. The old man had a name, Heléna told him: he was Gerard Weismann, the son of an illiterate farm hand who had triumphed over adversity. Before he'd retired he'd been a skilled doctor, a respected magistrate and a tireless charity organizer. He was a faithful husband and a beloved father and grandfather to seven. You couldn't measure that with a ruler and callipers, or put a number on it, and this was the last thing that the nationalists wanted them to know. There could be no half measures. From their point of view, the one, the only, the final solution was to whitewash over and eradicate this sympathetic human element altogether. That was about as close to a working definition of evil as you could get.

When Mister Weismann finally lay still, face down on the cold concrete paving slabs, two of the soldiers took him by the arms and legs and threw him into the back of the nearby truck, as you might some diseased animal carcass.

"Is there another way out of here?" Randal asked urgently, turning away sharply from the window.

"For you and Heléna, perhaps, but we'd only slow you up. There's an alley at the far end of the back yard"

Randal would have none of that and if ever there was a time and a place for *should*, then this was it. "Nonsense. We should leave. We *have to* leave. All of us. We have to get away from this place."

Too late, however. Just as they reached the back door in the kitchen, beyond which stone steps led down to the back yard, there was a loud knocking at the front door. Shortly after, without

waiting for a reply, the door was broken down and they clearly heard the sound of heavy steel toe-capped boots pounding up the stairs. They got as far as the stone steps to find yet more soldiers, one of them restraining a ferocious dog, teeth bared and barking, already in the back yard and barring their way.

They were quickly rounded up and thrust out on the street.

“Over there against the wall,” snapped an official. “Be sharp about it, we haven't got all day.”

“Identification,” demanded another, standing in front of Raimond and holding out his hand. Clearly shaken to the core, Raimond fished in his jacket pocket and nervously held out his identity card. The man snatched the card from his grasp.

“Wiggins, Raimond,” the assistant called out to the official.

“In the truck,” the official nodded, and one of the soldiers came forward, taking hold of Raimond's arm and half-dragged and half-carried him over to the waiting lorry. Raimond appeared utterly bewildered and kept looking back, his anxiety and his pleas written all over his face.

“Okay, you've got a full load. Take her away,” the soldier called to the driver, banging on the side of the lorry with his heavy baton, and the truck started up.

Elizabeth was horrified and dashed forward toward the vehicle, holding out her arms toward Raimond. The soldier manhandled her and pushed her back against the wall.

“Identification.”

“Wiggins, Elizabeth.”

“In the truck.”

Heléna was beside herself and, heart thumping heavily in his chest, Randal shuffled over to comfort her, but one of the soldiers intervened and dragged them apart.

“Identification.”

The assistant ripped the card from Heléna's grasp.

“Wiggins, Heléna.”

“In the house. You'll be assigned work in due course. Next.”

His hand shaking like a leaf, and unable to do any more than mime “I love you” as Heléna was pushed back inside the flat, Randal found his card and held it out.

“Smith, Randal.”

“I have no Smith on my list. Address?” the official demanded

to know.

The assistant spat out the address.

“That's not on the list.”

“He's a national. Gothgorian 4/4, Class B3.”

“Then what in heaven's name are you doing here, man, mixing with these Yuns? Go. Go on, get out of here. This area is strictly forbidden to you, do you understand?”

Randal nodded reluctantly.

“You are never to come back here. Now go, before I change my mind and add you to the list. Corporal, six off the trucks for this flat.”

“I left my shopping in the apartment ...”

The official stared him down. “Read my lips ...”

“Okay, okay, I'm going.” He snatched back his identification card. And with that, his legs turning to leaden jelly, Randal was off down the street.

As he approached the wire, one of the soldiers pulled it back to let him through. Only then did he see the council workers getting ready to go to work. They were unloading large sections of stout corrugated iron fencing from the back of a builder's lorry and heavy drills. So that's what they were going to do. They were setting up a ghetto and they were going to fence the people in.

Oh my God, this was all too much. This could *not* be happening. It was an absolute nightmare, except that pinch himself as hard as he might, he just couldn't wake up from it.

11. Desperate measures

On the way back home, Randal suddenly decided to change direction and head for Dave's flat, knocking on the door until his knuckles bruised, which brought out Dave's neighbour: the one with the dog.

She was a real slapper, her hair in curlers and a fag dangling from her bottom lip. It bounced up and down as she spoke.

"What you trying to do, break the friggin' door down?"

"I need to see Dave," he panted. "It's an emergency."

"He's not 'ere, love," she informed him. "I should try the pub; the off-license; the bookies; the supermarket; the local whore-house, or flaked out on a park bench – in that order – if I were you. He was abso-lutely plastered last night. Woke me up at three o'clock in the morning singing away and trying to get his key in the door. It wasn't even his own door, for crying out loud. *And* I've caught him standing on a stool and peeing in the kitchen sink, too ruddy lazy to go upstairs to the toilet and thinking nobody can see 'im. Mucky bugger."

Talking about standing on stools ... He thanked her and tiptoed gingerly back up the alley.

"Failing that, try sleeping it off in a police cell; having his stomach pumped at the hospital ... or the local morgue."

Charming.

Randal headed for the cash and carry warehouse, where Dave had recently found part-time work stacking shelves, to find he wasn't there. All the staff knew was that he'd worked the morning shift, leaving around noon and taking with him half a bottle of whiskey, a couple of cans of cheap baked beans and a loaf of bread past its "sell by" date.

It was Thursday and Thursday was pay day for most. Flush with money, the old slag was probably right: Dave probably was in the pub. The most likely place was the super pub, *Jollies*. That was his favourite haunt.

Randal felt quite hungover as the sudden surge of adrenaline began to finally die down. He felt sick to the pit of his stomach and really quite down in the dumps. Maybe it was the lack of

food? He hadn't eaten since breakfast. Even if Dave wasn't in *Jollie's* he should try to get some food down him to build up his energy. It could be a long day. He wondered what Heléna was doing now; what she was thinking and how she was feeling. She must be absolutely gutted and desperate and beside herself with worry, all rolled into one, poor love. And on top of that she had all those strangers dumped in her lap, wandering all over her home and helping themselves to her things, not least her parents' bed.

Lucian had a lot to answer for. And one day, one way or another, answer he most certainly would. Lucian maybe didn't know it yet, but his days were numbered.

Randal walked into the bar and surreptitiously scanned the room. Yes, Dave was there, sitting at a table in a dark corner. Alas, however, he was not alone. There were two Green Shirts with him, and a third was just returning from the bog, belatedly zipping up his flies.

He decided to go to the bar and take a stool there. Flipping through the glossy menu, he settled on an all-day breakfast which came with a free drink from a special selection. Catching the barmaid's eye he placed his order and had a sip of his stout whilst he waited for the order to be prepared and cooked.

Dave had seen him now and came across to the bar to greet him, though very discreetly. With his back to the Green Shirts, they wouldn't have even known that the pair were conversing. Randal simply told him that something important and confidential had come up and that he needed to meet up somewhere soon and talk it through with Dave.

Dave surreptitiously glanced at his watch. "Okay, I'll see you round at your place around four o'clock," he nodded, taking his drink and walking away.



Four o'clock came and went; as did five and six.

In the end, Randal went back round to Dave's flat. Peering through the window, he saw him spark out on the settee in the living room.

Randal knocked on the door and it came off the sneck and opened, so he decided that he might as well go in and announce his arrival.

Dave woke with a start and sprang up snarling, ready for anything. Fortunately for Randal, Dave soon took in the situation and slumped back down on the settee, toppling a tall stack of old magazines and sending them tumbling to the floor.

Though Dave didn't at all seem the part – looking more like some dishevelled private detective – he once admitted that he was a brown belt at martial arts. He could probably have gone on further, but he found himself walking around in a constant state of preparedness and began to worry about his ability to kill in an instant and the unthinkable possibility of this actually happening in a momentary lapse of reason.

“Sorry, I overslept,” groaned Dave, rubbing his reddened eyes. “Put the kettle on while I roll myself a cigarette and wake myself up.”

Randal was already through in the kitchen moving the ketchup and takeaway splashed dishes so that he could fill the kettle at the sink.

“Never again; never again,” Dave groaned aloud. “Next time I suggest going out for a drink, remind me not to, won't you? Tell me it would be utter folly.”

Thankfully this time Randal found a can of milk powder in the cupboard and – luxury of luxuries – he found a half-empty bag of sugar. Coffee brewed, he took the mugs through to the living room, cleared a space of its pile of discarded papers and sat down to wait patiently while Dave began to revive.

“So, what's this important and confidential stuff you wanted to talk through with me?” the lad asked at length, rolling a third cigarette and offering his pouch to Randal. Randal took a pinch of tobacco and a liquorice cigarette paper and rolled up. Dave tossed a lighter in his direction and he caught it in mid-flight and lit up.

He began to outline the story, with Dave nodding along to show that he was actually following the conversation, despite bog-eyed appearances to the contrary.

“What's her full name, this woman of yours?” Dave asked, pushing himself up to a sitting position and hunting around on the rubbish-strewn coffee table for a pen and a pad of paper.

“Heléna Wiggins.”

“Haddress?”

“Wiggins' butchery on South Street. Number 32, I think.

There's an archway by the shop and the flat she lives in is the first door on the left through the arch."

"First on the left through the arch," Dave echoed as he wrote down the details. "Good. Well, leave it with me."

"And?"

"And, though I can't promise you anything, I'll see what I can find out."

"And her parents – Raimond and Elizabeth?"

Dave said nothing for a time, rolling another cigarette and tossing the gear to Randal. "Help yourself. I get it cheap. Fallen off the back of a banana boat, or something like that."

"Her parents? They were taken away in a lorry with all the other old biddies and codgers, you say?"

Randal nodded.

"Then, much as I'm loath to say it, there's not a lot we can do to help them."

"How much *can* we do to help them."

"When were they taken?"

"Around noon today."

Dave looked at his watch. It was getting on for seven o'clock.

"I wouldn't hold out any high hopes," he sighed.

"We must help Heléna."

"I'll see what I can find out." Again Dave consulted his watch, out of habit more than anything. "Time you were off back if you want to beat the curfew."

It was Randal's turn to leap to his feet. "Oh, shit, I'd quite forgotten."

Dave lifted a buttock and let off a raucous fart. "You're welcome to doss down here for the night"

"No, I should get back," he thanked the lad, backing away.

"Anyhow, there's nothing we can do today. Let's see what tomorrow brings. Tomorrow is a brand new day."

Randal nodded reluctantly. "Okay, Dave, and thanks. I'll see you tomorrow." And with that, he hoofed it up the road back home before the church bells started ringing to announce the impending arrival of curfew.



Randal hardly slept a wink that night for worry, twice getting up to make himself a coffee and to roll a cigarette. Then, before

he knew it, it was morning.

All of a sudden there came a pounding on the door and glancing at the clock he was shocked to find that it was only six thirty. That was deeply worrying. He peered out through the lace curtains but could see no-one down below, though there was a car parked opposite the flat with its engine running.

He pulled on his jeans and a sweater and clattered down the stairs. Drawing in a deep breath, he unlocked the door and opened it. It was Dave and he was dressed in his finest ... the dark green uniform of the Green Shirts, replete with peaked cap and sword and shield insignia.

“What's up? Third Great War begun?”

Looking furtively around, Dave pushed him inside. “Grab a few essentials and meet me outside. I'll be in the car.”

“Essentials?”

“Bare essentials. I'll give you five minutes, and if you're not out by then, sorry buddy, but I'm off.” And with that Dave walked back to the car and Randal clattered back upstairs and packed his haversack.

He reappeared shortly after, dashing to the car. Dave pulled a lever in the dashboard and the boot opened, so he heaved the haversack in the boot, slammed it shut and clambered in the car beside Dave.

Dave was away before he'd even had a chance to buckle his safety belt.

“You wouldn't really have left me, would you?” he asked, a little perturbed.

Dave smiled and shook his head. “No, but I had to make sure that the cobwebs were blown away and that you'd pull your finger out. We don't have much time.”

He nodded his head toward the back of the car. There was another dark green shirt there. “Slip it on. It's not the full works, since you won't have the appropriate paperwork to pose as a fully-fledged member, but it'll look convincing enough.”

“Where are we going?”

“Out of town,” was all that Dave would say.

They turned off the main street and Dave took a right, then a left, and brought the car to a halt in the shadows, flashing his headlights briefly. At that signal a figure emerged from the

darkness and came hurrying across, clutching a coat in one hand and a carrier-bag in the other. As the figure opened the back door of the car and clambered in, with a thrill Randal realized who it was: it was Heléna.

“Heavens be praised! Oh, Heléna, it's so good to see you.” He waited until Heléna had settled herself, and reached across to put his arm around her shoulder, to comfort her.

“Save it for later,” Dave advised as a second figure emerged, ran toward the car and clambered in.

Without waiting for the guy to close the door, Dave was off. “Randal, meet my kid brother, Logan. Logan meet Randal.”

“So, what happened?” Randal wanted to know, once Dave had driven them out of town and he began to feel a little safer.

“I went round and got Heléna out after you'd left,” Dave explained, cocking his head to one side and peering into the rear view mirror every now and again. “I told the guard at the fence that Heléna was wanted for questioning. On the way out he got a little too inquisitive for his own good – I reckon he'd smelt a rat – so my fist had an accident with his wind pipe.

“Anyhow, rather than go back to my place I took us both round to spend the night at my brother's and see if I could borrow his car. As you can see, he decided he might as well come along. The rest you know.”

“You make it sound all so easy”

“Easy?” Dave replied, feigning surprise. “Far from it. I was quaking in my boots. On the way to my brother's we had two close shaves, once with an army curfew patrol laying in wait in the shadows at a crossroads. We ducked down an alley in the nick of time, and we were stuck there for a good hour before the patrol moved on. Well, I say 'good hour', but the truth be told it was bloody awful. I thought the pongos were there for the duration.”

“Pongos?”

“Enlisted men. Army chaps,” Logan interpreted. “It's a derogatory term.”

“Where the soldiers go, the pong goes,” Dave told her. “Mostly the raw recruits. Given a good 'beasting' by the sergeant for their lack of personal hygiene, they soon learn to keep themselves clean. I remember my old man telling me about the time he spent in the army on national service – a time when

everyone had to train in the army for two years. There was one bloke, a real stinker, and one day the sergeant had him marched stark bollock naked onto the parade ground. Then they sat him in an old zinc-plated bath with all his mates watching while they threw buckets of ice cold water over him and scrubbed him down with a bog brush. He learnt the hard way – and never forgot the lesson.

“Bro', roll me up a cigarette would you? I'm getting withdrawal symptoms with all this driving.

“Where was I? Oh, yes, getting across town unseen. The other obstacle was a police car. They'd ruddy well decided to park up and grab a few winks of sleep at the end of my brother's road. I did think we might sneak past them, but daren't risk it. Could be they were only lightly dozing. If we'd been caught we'd have really been up shit creek. Anyhow, we had to make a detour all the way down Hazel Avenue and Sidney street and back up the street from the other end. I was up half the night waiting for a pounding on the door. And I had the trots.”

“Trots?” Heléna enquired, a puzzled expression on her face.

“Trust me, you really don't want to go there,” Logan advised her. “Suffice it to say that too much beer and baked beans is a lethal cocktail.”

“When I farted, I could have pebble-dashed a row of houses at a hundred yards,” Dave explained.

“That's too much information, bro',” Logan grimaced. “There are ladies present.”

“Sorry. Speaking of dozing,” added Dave, “I remember my old man telling me another story about his time in the army. His squad were absolutely knackered one day and his sergeant had advised him: 'if you have the choice between standing and sitting, sit; if you have the choice between sitting and laying down, lay down; if you have the choice between staying awake and grabbing even a few moments' sleep, sleep.' This proved to be sound advice.

“Anyhow, we're still here in the land of the living – if you can still call it that – and away from the city, and that's all that really matters,” Dave concluded pragmatically.

Once out of town, Dave took to a maze of quite narrow and winding country roads. Dave was driving fast and Randal was

hoping and praying that they wouldn't meet anything coming the other way.

"I think we'll take the scenic route," Dave told them. "It would be unfortunate if we were to come up against a road block or army patrol."

"Where are we heading?" asked Randal, bumping up and down and swaying this way and that as Dave negotiated the many pot holes in the road, sometimes successfully and sometimes not.

"It's better that you don't know," Dave advised him, reaching behind him and taking another lit cigarette from his brother. "That's it, bro', keep me stocked up."

"Better?"

"I'm sorry for all the secrecy, but as my old man used to say: 'What you don't know can't hurt you' ... or inadvertently hurt others."

A few miles further on, Dave turned the car off the the metalled road and down a narrow dirt track that wound its way down a heavily wooded valley. The sun was shining as bright as ever that day, but here they were under the thick canopy of trees, punctuated every now and again by bright, angular shafts of light.

Finally, he slowed the car and took a turning to the left, scrunching up a narrow gravel driveway, to pull up outside an old timber and stone-framed manor house.

"Here we are," he beamed triumphantly as he turned the engine off and opened the car door. Logan was out of the car and went round to the driver's side to open the door and let Heléna out. He seemed quite the gentleman of the family.

Ahead of them, at the house, curtains were twitching.

Logan took off his peaked cap and began to unbutton his shirt. "Bro'", he advised. "We don't want to freak them out."

"Good point. Well done, that man." Dave and Randal followed suit, tossing their shirts and caps in the car.

"I'll drive the old banger round the back, out of the sight," Logan decided, getting into the still-warm driver's seat and starting the engine up.

As they approached the house, walking hand in hand with Heléna, a figure came out to greet them. He was a tall, slim and quite elderly gentleman and he held his arms out and embraced Dave. "David, David. It's so good to see you again. You should

have let me know you were coming and I'd have made arrangements.”

“It's a long story, Henry,” Dave replied, as if this explained anything.

“Ah, I see. Well, we'll talk about that later. 'First eat, then talk' – that's my motto. Friends, come inside and I'll get Missus Shah to make up some sandwiches and brew a pot of tea, while we're properly introduced.”

The gentleman led the way up the wide, curved steps to the front door and politely ushered them inside, leaving the door open for Logan on his return, then showed them into a large airy reception room to the right of the hallway.

“The name's Henry,” the man told them, ushering them to their seats. “If you'll forgive me, it's perhaps more prudent, given the current events, that I refrain from telling you more. Come, sit down and make yourselves at home. David, perhaps you'd be good enough to introduce me to your friends?”

A few minutes later and introductions and polite chit-chat over, a lady appeared wheeling a silver-plated trolley. She cleared the coffee table that stood between them and began to arrange the delicate sandwiches, before turning toward Henry. “Will there be anything else, m'lord? I'm sorry, if I'd known we'd be having visitors, I'd have”

“No, no. I'll take over from here, thank you kindly, Missus Shah. And I must compliment you on putting together such a tasty-looking spread at such short notice.”

The lady curtsied and left the room, pulling the door to behind her.

“Well, don't stand on ceremony, chaps and chapesses – tuck in. Heléna, my dear, how do you prefer your tea? Anyone who likes it weak, speak up now; if not, I'll leave it to brew a little longer.”

The snack over, Logan helped Henry clear the decks and wheel the trolley out of the way.

“Very well, David,” said Henry, slapping his thighs. “Down to brass tacks, my friend. 'It's a long story,' you began when you first arrived”

“Mind if I smoke?” Dave cleared his throat and fished around for his tobacco pouch.

“You can burst into flames if you so desire,” quipped Logan.

Being a good host, Henry went over to a cabinet and returned with a pair of silver ashtrays and offered complimentary cigarettes and cigars around. Dave took one of the king size cigarettes and promptly broke the filter off to smoke it straight.

“Perhaps I should begin by outlining recent events in the metropolis?” Dave began, lighting up, sucking his breath in and letting out a cloud of blue-grey smoke.

Dave drew an impromptu sketch of life under the new regime, and quite impressed Randal with his skilled oratory. Inevitably, he turned to more recent events, notably the setting up and fencing in of ghettos in some areas of the city, and of the policy of enforced repatriation. Randal helped out by filling in a few of the missing details, though he chose his words carefully.

Only when Heléna had asked to use the bathroom and Logan had offered to show her the way, and she was out of earshot, did Dave reveal the true nature of the removals.

“There is no enforced repatriation,” Dave told them. “That’s simply a ruse. The people are being taken away to labour camps.”

“You knew that all along?” asked Randal.

Dave nodded. “Yes, that’s why I tried to convince you not to hold out any high hopes.”

Though clearly shocked and saddened by this grave news, Henry appeared to take it in his stride.

As Heléna reappeared from having powdered her nose, Dave turned to more specific events and recounted in detail how Randal had asked him for help following the raid on the houses, culminating in Heléna’s parents being taken away. He told how he’d later gone to get Heléna out of there and, having been rumbled, how he had been forced to kill a soldier guarding the newly-erected fence, and he finished with a brief account of their journey here.

Dave reached over to the table and helped himself to another cigarette. He lit it and looked at his watch. “We should be getting back, bro”, he pointed out to Logan. “If we’re asked, we’ll make out we’ve been on a shopping trip to Marston Moor. On the way back, we’d better get in a few provisions – I could do with a pair of new boots, by the way – to back up our cover story.”

It was Henry’s turn to light up a cigarette. He had a worried

look in his eye. Stubbing his cigarette out in the ash tray before he'd taken more than half a dozen puffs, he got up and went over to the drinks cabinet, then came back, setting five glasses before him. He uncorked the decanter and went round the glasses, filling them.

"I'll admit, you have me worried here, David," the gentleman spoke at length. "Not so much worried for me, you understand, but worried for you and your brother Logan."

"How come?"

"You're an intelligent chap, David. And so, sadly, are the type of people we're up against – at least in the higher echelons: I'm not talking about your average Fascist Grunt. Some of them would be dangerous if they had two brain cells to rub together."

"I'm sure it's nothing we can't handle," Dave countered.

"Let's look at the facts, David," said Henry, taking a sip of his brandy and lighting up a second cigarette which he smoked this time. "From what you've told me, we have a dead guard at the ghetto. We also have a missing person from that ghetto. One afternoon, an official with a clipboard ticks her off his list as present and accounted for; the next day, when they do a head count – and be assured, they *will* do a head count – they find her missing."

"Then our official happens to remember that there was a Gothgorian national at the flat when they raided it. His assistant can even remember the surname and the address."

"They raid our friend Randal's flat to find that he, too, has disappeared. So, putting two and two together, they issue warrants for the arrest of friends Heléna and Randal and they leaflet the city with wanted posters."

"You're an intelligent chap, David," Henry reiterated, "and I'm sure you're with me so far."

Dave nodded. He was looking a little flushed and he went into his tobacco pouch and rolled himself another cigarette. By now the airy room was filled with smoke which floated in thin layers in the air around them. Henry went to open a window to offer some ventilation.

"Now, it's not long before some Green Shirt sees the wanted poster and remembers having seen our friends Heléna and Randal in your company, perhaps talking in the street or having a drink

together in a pub.”

What immediately sprang to Randal's mind was the time he and Heléna had gone out for a meal at *The Tap and Spile*. “Yes,” he nodded, and he reminded Dave of that event, including the damning evidence of Dave having them believe that Randal was “working for us, but undercover.”

“Oh Lord, I'm sorry: but I've put your life in jeopardy, Dave. I am so sorry; truly I am.”

“It was my choice, Randal. I chose to befriend you. I chose to lie and to protect you. I chose to kill the guard – well, it was all over in a flash, to tell the truth. It just happened on the spur of the moment. What I mean is that you and Heléna mustn't go blaming yourselves.

“I knew what I was getting into when I signed up for this. I fully accept the responsibility and the consequences of my actions and my inactions.

“No matter what had happened, even if I'd never known you, Randal, I'd have been rumbled sooner or later. I'm quite lucky to have lasted so long.”

Randal immediately picked up on that turn of phrase: “Rumbled?”

Dave looked at Henry, as if unsure of quite how he should answer that, or even if he should answer it at all.

Henry thought for a moment and drew himself up in his chair. “That settles it, then,” he said at length. “I'm sorry David and Logan, but I'm going to have to pull rank on you on this one. There's no way you can go back to the metropolis.”

“But ...”

“No buts.”

“Pull rank?”

Henry leant forward in his chair. “All right, I'll level with you, Randal. David works for me.”

“So you're not actually a Green Shirt?”

“Nope. I'm not. Never have been. Never will be. I thought you knew me better than that.”

“Sorry, Dave.” Randal bit his lip.

“So it was all an act?” It was a rhetorical question.

Dave nodded.

“Well, hell, you sure lived the part.”

Dave smiled and raised his eyebrows. "If you don't live the part ninety nine percent, you don't last long in this game."

"David works for me," Henry reiterated. "And I work for The Network."

"The Network?"

"It's a kind of resistance movement. We work here and in the Freelands, helping out wherever we find a need.

"Now, I think the first thing we should do is get you settled in for two or three days, then I'll see what I can arrange to get you and your friends out of here.

"Tell me, when you made your hasty exit, did you leave behind anything that might incriminate you, or us?"

Dave shook his head. "It's all up here," he said, tapping the side of his head with his finger.

"Or on your computer ..." Henry suggested.

Dave smiled. "Before I left I pulled out the hard drive and collected up my floppy disks. I brought them all with me."

Then what looked like an awful thought suddenly darkened Dave's face: "What about you, Randal?"

"But you said to pack only the bare essentials"

"Oh, hell. There's bound to be all sorts of stuff from Comms Net on your hard drive."

"Oh ye of little faith, when I packed, I stuffed my mini tower in the rucksack. And my floppies."

Logan laughed out loud. "Well, thank God for obsession! Shit, I thought the thing felt bloody heavy when I brought it in after parking the car. Thought you'd brought along the kitchen sink."

"Why would Comms Net incriminate anyone?" Randal wanted to know.

"It's one of our operations, Randal," Henry informed him. "Does the handle 'Puck69' ring a bell with you? The one who helped you out with the software you were struggling with? That was a good friend of ours who helps us out with all the new technology. He was quite impressed with your work and wondered if there was any way we might recruit you into our little enterprise."

Randal laughed out loud. "Well, as they say where I come from: 'Ill got t'foot of our stair!'"

“And here you are.”

“Here I am, indeed.”

“Well, it doesn't really matter how you found your way to our door, as my own Master would say, the main thing is that you actually *have* made it here.”

A thought occurred to Randal. “What about that foul-mouthed fascist troll 'HailLucian101'? Wasn't he a risk?”

Henry laughed. “That foul-mouthed fascist troll' as you so appositely put it is not a he but a she. She's Lucinda, my better half, to be precise.”

“Oops. Will someone please help me extract my foot from my mouth? Well, that just goes to show that you can't judge by appearances,” Randal gulped.

“Actually, Randal, I'm sure that Lucinda would take that as a compliment for a job well done. You see, Lucinda is there to sort the sheep from the wolves. She encourages folk to open up and gains their confidence to get them to reveal their true colours. One can never be too careful in this line of work. You know, what we could really do with is a means of conversing privately with these people. We could find out so much more about them, but that's by the by.”

“I see.” Then: “I must apologize to her. I gave her such a hard time in the newsgroups, calling her all the names under the sun.”

“Yes, that did not go unnoticed. To tell the truth, being 'in the know' or 'in on the joke', as it were, Lucinda thought some of your replies to her were an absolute hoot. It takes a lot to offend dear Lucinda. But I'll certainly let her know you're here and wish her well. She's out visiting an elderly Aunt right now, but she'll be back by mid-afternoon.

“And now, friends, if you'll excuse me, I must set about making arrangements. I'm sure Logan here would be only too happy to point you in the right direction and help out with anything you might need. And Missus Shah is available, too. For now, just make yourselves at home. Relax and drink in the wonderful, invigorating country air. 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy', as they so rightly say.”

For the first time since the recent traumatic events, Randal and Heléna got to spend some quiet time on their own together, walking through the grounds of the manor. At the bottom of the

garden in amongst the trees, there was a narrow stream and a tiny wooden bridge, and beyond that was a gravel path leading up to the top of a small hill overlooking the estate. They sat there on the summit for a good half hour, taking in their surroundings and chatting amiably. Randal could not help but notice how tinged with sadness Heléna was, and yet she was bearing up quite well, all things considered.

Inevitably, the question arose, though Randal had been vainly hoping and praying that it would not.

“What can we do to help Mama and Papa?” she asked, looking so sorrowful as she peered into his dark brown eyes.

Randal took her tiny hand in his own and gently caressed her fingers. He tried to find the right kind of delicate words in which to couch his answer, but some things cannot be put in a sufficiently delicate manner.

“I don't know how to tell you this, beloved, but having thought long and hard about the matter, I realize that you are owed a truthful explanation.

“Alas, my love, you need to brace yourself for bad news.”

He paused a few moments, sensing her tensing up, her delicate touch on his hand tightening into a grip, and letting these words sink in.

“According to Dave, the people have been sent to labour camps. It would be nigh impossible to get them out,” he told her, hanging his head.

She pulled her hand away and went to touch him under the chin and gently raise his head up so that he again met her gaze.

Heléna shuffled closer and buried her head in his lap and they sat for almost half an hour like that, with him gently stroking her hair, her shoulders, her back. That's all he could do right now: simply be here for Heléna in her hour of need. And perhaps that's all she really needed of him right now?

Finally she arose and they walked, hand in hand back down the hill, across the stream and back to the manor house. His trousers were drenched with Heléna's tears, not that this mattered one jot. He just hoped that the catharsis of emotion and the tears had cleansed her in some way.

They all ate in the stately dining hall that evening. They'd met Lady Lucinda briefly when she'd returned in the late

afternoon, but she had been preoccupied with first of all being brought into the picture regarding recent events and then with helping Henry make arrangements. So this was the first time that they really got to meet her and get to know a little about her.

Something was certainly afoot regarding the arrangements, but neither Lucinda nor Henry would be drawn. "It's all still up in the air," he told them, with an unknowing shrug of his shoulders. "I've been in touch with HQ and I'm still waiting for them to get back to me. So, if the truth be told, you're as wise as I am, or conversely I'm as much in the dark as you are, on the matter. But rest assured that I'll keep you posted."

After dinner, they retired to Henry's study to watch the evening news on the television and after that, they sat round a table and played a few hands of cards to pass the time. He was partnering Lucinda that night and he was quite amazed at what a sharp and observant cookie she was, winning hand after hand. She either had a bloody good memory as to which cards had previously been played, or else she was a mind reader.

Somehow or other, the subject of conversation came around to The Network.

"Who runs The Network?" asked Heléna, though Randal hardly expected Henry or Lucinda to provide a reply.

"Speaking of who's in charge," Dave laughed, "I heard a good joke about that." Apparently the various organs of the body were arguing about who should be in charge and giving their reasons for why the role they played in the body was so important. Eventually the arse hole spoke up and said that really he should be in charge. Of course, the other organs laughed at this ludicrous idea, and so the arse hole clamped itself shut. To cut a long story short, as a result of this, eventually all the other organs in the body began to falter and eventually, unable to take any more, they relented and decided that the arse hole should be in charge after all. And the moral of the story is that you don't have to be important to be in charge, just an arse hole.

Randal kept looking at Lucinda and Henry, thinking they might be mortified by Dave's toilet humour, but Henry appeared genuinely amused and as for Lady Lucinda, she looked like she might wet herself if she wasn't careful. So the joke was quite an ice breaker, as it happens. And it offered Lucinda the chance to

change the subject without having to politely decline to answer Heléna's question.

When Lucinda had recovered her composure, laughing and fanning her face to calm herself down, she suggested a game of charades which whiled away another hour and was actually damn good fun. It was certainly useful in helping the group better bond.

After he and Louise had separated, Randal had thought that he'd never get used to living on his own and then, after living on his own for so long, he wondered if he'd ever get used to company; until Heléna had come along, that is. And with her company and now playing such simple family pastimes as charades, only now did he realize just what he'd been missing when his head had been buried in his computer screen. Looking back, he could see how the time he spent and the energy he expended on his incessant projects had been a key factor in the breakdown of his relationship, though at the time he'd thought it so important to become skilled, in order to better himself and hence improve his family's circumstances. Looking back, he now realized that he'd been such a short-sighted fool. And yet, had it not been for his breakup with Louise, then he might never have met and fallen for Heléna.

Soon enough it was supper time. Missus Shah had prepared the food earlier before going off duty and retiring to her room, so it was left to their hosts Henry and Lucinda to see to the tea.

"Nightcap, anyone?" Henry asked, hovering at the open cocktail cabinet. Uncharacteristically, however, on this occasion he had no takers. Even Dave passed on the opportunity, having had only the one drink since they'd left the city. Perhaps that, too, had been all part of the act. What was it called when an actor attempted to engender the thoughts and feelings of the character they aimed to portray? Ah yes: method acting.

He caught sight of Heléna gazing in his direction and this broke his reverie. Until then, he hadn't noticed himself drifting off.

"Penny for them," she lilted, meaning that she'd pay him a penny for his thoughts.

He smiled. "That's what my mother would say to me from time to time."

"You were miles away," she observed. "Perhaps it's time we

turned in?"

We? We not I?

"I gather Missus Shah has sorted out your rooms?" Lucinda enquired. "I'm sure she has, but better to check."

"Yes, thank you," they nodded, offering their thanks for the hospitality, begging leave one by one, and heading off upstairs.

Randal stopped outside Heléna's door to wish her a good night. He was about to walk off, but she tugged at his sleeve and held him there until the others had disappeared into their own rooms. Then she reached up and put her arms around his neck and they kissed. Despite the fact that they'd been going out with one-another for several months now, this was the first time that they'd actually exchanged a truly passionate kiss and it left Randal feeling in dire need of a cold shower to cool his ardour.

"Wow. Phew ..." he panted at length, when she allowed him up for air. "Well, beloved, I'll bid you a very fond goodnight. Sleep well."

Heléna turned away to open her bedroom door. Then, clasping hold of his hand, she tugged him inside. Pushing the door shut with her stockinged foot, she embraced him anew.

"Stay with me tonight," she begged him. "Please."

"Are you sure you want me to?"

"What kind of a question is that, Randal Smith?" she asked, screwing up her face as if vexed, then she suddenly broke into a beaming smile. "Of course I do, you silly man, or I wouldn't have asked. If I haven't told you before, I'm telling you now: I'm madly in love with you, as I have been for some time."

"I know, Heléna, but you don't have to prove it," he offered gently. "I won't love you any the less"

"And I know, too, Randal, and I *do* want to prove it," Heléna replied, slowly unbuttoning his shirt and running her hand over his manly chest.

It was gone midnight by the time they finally settled down, laying in one-another's arms for a time, still basking in the warm and dreamy afterglow of their passionate lovemaking, before reluctantly parting, turning over and falling fast and contentedly asleep.

Before they knew it, it was morning and the sun was streaming in through the windows.

12. On the move

Just as they were enjoying laying there, arm in arm and basking in this golden, early morning sun, there came an abrupt and unexpected knock at the door.

Oops.

“Just a minute,” called Heléna, jumping out of bed and frantically hunting around the room for the dressing gown that Missus Shah had left out for her use. It had been there at the bottom of the bed last night.

She caught hold of Randal's hand and tugged him to the walk-in wardrobe, pushing him inside and closing the door behind him before dashing around the room to pick up the stray clothes and hide them under the covers in the bed.

Again there was a knock at the door, a little more insistent this time.

“Hang on, I'm coming.”

She opened the door to find Logan outside. When he saw her in her silky dressing gown and stockings, he cast his eyes down and seemed a little awkward. “Time to get up, I'm afraid. We have to make an early start.”

“Oh, crikey. Right, thanks. I'll be down as soon as I can.”

“Have you seen Randal? I couldn't get an answer at his door.”

“Oh, it's all right, you get on, I'll see if I can wake him, Logan. And thanks.”

Logan appeared a little puzzled and then something dawned on him. “Ah, I *see*. You're welcome.”

She went back inside her room and closed the door behind her, then let poor old Randal out of the wardrobe.

Luxury of luxuries, the room had an *en-suite* bathroom attached, so the two of them shared a wonderful hot shower together, soaping each other down, before dressing and heading downstairs.

The others were down already and tucking into a full traditional cooked breakfast, and they joined them. Having spent the night together, Randal for one was feeling a little self-conscious, but his paranoia was unfounded and they soon settled

back in.

“What's the rush?” he asked Dave, who was wolfing down a bacon sandwich.

“There's talk of the army closing the borders. Apparently word has got around about the repatriations and the ghettos and a whole heap of folk have been trying to leave the country while they still can, especially the Collectivists, who fear that they'll be next. A lot of nationals want out, too, as they're not happy about the way the country's going.

“There's also talk of the Freelands closing the borders on their side, superfluous as that might be, as they're not hot on the idea of being lumbered with thousands of refugees.”

“I see. So we're to leave Gothgoria?” enquired Heléna.

Dave nodded and spoke again between mouthfuls. “Henry was hoping to get us to the Freelands directly, but it looks like we'll have to take to the hills and make for the Outlands, and – when it can be arranged – enter the Freelands from there.”

“When it can be arranged?” she wondered.

Dave shrugged. “It's not easy getting folk into the Freelands, especially from the Outlands. It'll require careful organization. So it could take some time.”

“What sort of time scale, roughly speaking,” she wanted to know.

“Oh, I would say a matter of a few days, but don't quote me on that,” Dave replied, washing his sandwich down and looking around for the coffee pot to top up his mug.

“The Outlands” Heléna echoed, having no doubt heard of the grim deprivation they were suffering there.

Dave took another bite and waited until he'd emptied his mouth. “These days anywhere has to be better than Gothgoria, and in any case it would only be a temporary staging post.”

They were ready and waiting on the marble steps outside the manor house when their transport finally turned up. The first thing they heard was a series of loud bangs. For a moment they feared the worst: that they'd been rumbled. It was with some relief that they discovered that it was just the truck's engine backfiring. And the next thing they heard was the pitiful squealing of the pigs. It was a battered old wagon with pigs squeezed into two decks behind the cab, destined for the

slaughterhouse.

The truck stopped at the bottom of the gravel driveway and the driver clambered out and came up the drive at a trot. They left the steps and went to meet him, with Henry and Lucinda following on at a more sedate pace.

“Begging your pardon, your Lordship,” the man greeted Henry, clutching his flat cap in his hands before him. “There’ll been a bit of a delay. Arnold’s had a flat tyre and is having a devil of a job getting the spare on, as one of the nuts has rusted up. He’ll be along as soon as he can.”

Henry nodded. “Not to worry, and thank you for letting us know, my good man.”

The man went on his way, leaving the others standing there looking rather bemused, which didn’t escape Lucinda’s attention. “Oh, you didn’t think You did! You really thought that your transport had arrived. Oh my” She was in hysterics, clutching onto her aching sides.

“Can you imagine the scene, Henry?”

Henry stroked his chin thoughtfully. “You know, Lucinda, that really could be an idea.”

“You have got to be joking,” retorted Dave, shaking his head in disbelief. At which point, Henry’s features broke into a mischievous grin and he was slapping his thighs.

As it turned out their actual transport, when it arrived an hour later, was little more salubrious. It was a tall furniture removals van. They had expected to make the journey in the back of the truck, perhaps sitting on a suitably arranged suite, but that was not to be.

Enlisting his mate’s help, the driver took out the front seat in the cab and then a panel behind that, to reveal a narrow cavity into which they had to squeeze before being sealed inside. If anyone opened up the long truck, they wouldn’t imagine that the far end of the truck, in actuality a false wall, was three feet short of the external dimensions, especially since they were carrying a full load of furniture.

Sitting there side-on to the truck with their knees tucked up to their chins, this was one of the longest and bumpiest rides that Randal had had to endure, with only a flickering candle to cast a little light around the cell. And Heléna, who sat facing him,

looked like vomit might erupt from her mouth at any moment. As for Dave and Logan, they both looked like death warmed up, though that was perhaps a trick of the light.

The lorry must have stopped two or three times en-route. There was a lot of clattering in the back and Randal could only assume that the driver and his mate were loading and unloading. It all seemed to be part of their regular routine – they were just a little added cargo.

At length, however, when Randal was beginning to think that his bladder might burst if he didn't answer the call of nature, the truck came to a halt, and a few moments after that, they could hear the driver and his mate pulling out the seat in front of them. They shielded their eyes from the blinding sunlight as the driver removed the panel.

“This is as far as we go, friends, so get out and stretch your legs. Someone else will be along in a few minutes to take you into the hills.”

Their legs almost seized up through this prolonged confinement, they struggled out of the hidey hole, clambered down from the cab and staggered out onto the road. All around them, as far as the eye could see there was barren moorland, strewn with bracken and bright-yellow flecked gorge bushes.

“Where are we?” Dave wanted to know.

“You can't see it from here, but three miles down the road to the north is the village of Yulegrave,” said the man, pointing into the distance. He swung around. “That fork to the east leads to Garthorpe which is near enough ten miles distant. And thirty miles south is the market town of Sheldrake.”

“Now mind, you'd best stay away from the road in case anyone happens to pass and sees you. The fellow you're waiting for is a farmer by the name of Grimes; big fat fella with a straw hat on a bushy head of red hair. Make sure you remember that. He'll be travelling north with a rusty red tractor towing a high trailer full of loose hay. From here you head east, way past Garthorpe; like as not sleeping the night at his place, then heading into the hills. Should be over the border into the Outlands by midday tomorrow. And come tomorrow evening you should be tucked up all cosy and safe.”

“Anyway, best of luck to you.” The man doffed his cap and

they thanked him, then he got back in his cab and used the nearby fork in the road to turn his vehicle around and head back south.

“I hope they’ve got the right paperwork in case they get stopped,” Randal commented.

“Don’t worry, we’re in safe hands now,” Dave replied. “Henry’s done this many times before and that’s not the kind of detail he’d neglect. He’s a stickler for detail. If anyone were to follow up on the matter, they’d discover the one house recently devoid of furniture and another house or store in need, you can be sure of that.”

They left the dusty road and waded through the bracken until they were well out of sight, and lay there in the sun, waiting for the fresh transport to arrive. The sun was riding high in the sky, casting short, sharp shadows. Looking at his watch, Randal saw that it was already getting on for one o’clock. Time to unwrap the lunch that Missus Shah had so thoughtfully provided for them.

After perhaps an hour, they saw the old tractor puffing its way slowly up the road. Logan was ready to make for the road to ensure they were seen, but Dave advised him to hang back until they’d made sure that it was him. As the battered old tractor came still closer they could by now make out a portly man at the wheel, wearing a bright yellow straw hat under a thick mop of red hair, and – seeing no other vehicles on the road – they decided that it was safe to go out and flag him down.

Mister Grimes looked jolly enough at first sight, but appeared to be a man of few words, and when Heléna started to introduce herself, he brushed her aside. “No offence, ma’am,” the man replied, touching the brim of his hat, “but the less I knows ’bout you and you ’bout me the better. Can’t be too careful, I say. Can’t be too careful.”

The man went round the back of the trailer and helped them clamber aboard. “That’s it, bury yourselves down inside good an’ proper, at least until we’re clear of Garthorpe.”

And with that, the man fired up the old tractor in a vast plume of smoke and burning oil, and they were away. It was actually quite comfortable in amongst the hay, and Randal and Heléna could enjoy a little surreptitious slap and tickle without the others being any the wiser. So, all in all, this leg of the journey was a lot more enjoyable than the previous leg had been.

“Well, make yourselves at home,” the farmer said when they finally arrived at his place and alighted from the trailer. Mister Grimes pointed to the barn across the dusty farm yard, stopping for a few moments as he headed toward the old farm house. “I’ll send my missus out in a few minutes with some grub to fill your bellies. Reckon you could use some food after such a long journey. Rabbit stew and soft suet dumplings. Don’t knows ‘bout you, but I can’t abide a hard dumpling. Shot the rabbit myself the other day, so watch out for the odd bit of buckshot.”

Missus Grimes was a bit more talkative than her husband and she stayed a while after taking the food out to them, and helped ladle the stew and dumplings onto their plates. “Don’t mind my hubby,” she confided in them. “He can come over as a bit standoffish, but it’s only because he gets anxious. Under that gruff exterior beats a heart of gold.”

“Just pile your plates up and leave them by the door when you’re done and I’ll see to them. If you need to freshen up, there’s the tap and a bucket over yonder. Yes, just by the horse trough. And if you need to answer the call of nature, the privy’s over the far side of the yard.

“I’m sorry it’s not quite up to your usual standards but it’s the best we can manage out here in the wilds. I got married and came up here when I was but a slip of a girl, and all this came as a bit of a shock to me, I can tell you,” she laughed, clasping her hands together. “This life took some getting used to, though now I wouldn’t swap it for the world.

Missus Grimes pulled herself up straight. “Now, back to business. You’ll need to make an early start into the hills tomorrow morning, so I’m afraid you’ll have to be up with the larks. Don’t worry, I’m always up and about first thing and I’ll wake you. I’ll bring you breakfast and tea once you’ve washed and dressed.

“Oh yes, you’ll be wanting something to slake your thirst, no doubt. I wouldn’t use the tap if I were you. I’ll pop back out in a minute and bring you a nice big jug of lemonade and some beakers.”

And with that, Mollie Grimes was off back to the farm house with a spring in her step. It appeared that she welcomed the company.

When Randal was suddenly awakened amidst the hay the next morning, with the sun just coming up over the horizon, it was not to the dulcet tones of Mollie Grimes, it was looking down the wrong end of a double barrellled shotgun.

“Oh my God!” he screamed out and pushed himself away.

“Randal? What's up?” came a voice to his left. It was Heléna and she looked concerned.

“Randal? Wake up!” came the voice again, and only then did Randal realize he was dreaming and wake up fully from that twilight world. The scene had been so vivid and real.

“You were having a nightmare, my precious,” Heléna told him, cuddling him in her arms.

“Thank God for that,” he whistled, wiping away the cold beads of perspiration that had formed on his forehead. “I thought for a moment that we were well and truly done for.”

They were all awake now so, early as it was, there was no point in turning over and going back to sleep.

True to her word, Mollie appeared shortly afterwards with four mugs of hot tea, milk and sugar. “I'll bring your breakfast in a few minutes,” she told them. “Just give a little knock on the kitchen door when you're washed and ready.”

They'd expected something simple like lumpy porridge for breakfast – and indeed porridge there was, but when they'd finished that, Mollie was out again to clear up their dishes, this time armed with bacon and eggs, a thick farmhouse loaf which looked like she'd freshly baked it herself, and a dish of freshly churned, creamy butter.

“It's the most important meal of the day,” she told them, when they thanked her for this wondrous spread, “and I'm sure you'll be glad of it: you've a fair way to go today.”

When their next guide arrived, Mollie came out to see them off and Logan did his best to pay her and her husband for their hospitality, having been given money by Henry for this purpose, but she would have none of it, and he didn't press the matter for fear of insulting her.

Their guide introduced himself as Elmor. Like Mister Grimes, he had a thick mop of red hair and might actually have been a relative, especially given the fond greetings he exchanged

with Mollie, but he seemed far more approachable.

The man brought with him a string of ponies, one of which was a little smaller than the others and he offered this mount to Heléna, having been forewarned, presumably, that one of the party was on the petite side. It was at this moment, as she attempted to mount the animal, that Heléna wished she'd thought to pack a pair of trousers or a longer skirt, so rather than embarrass or titillate the other men in her company, she took Randal's whispered advice, borrowed a spare pair of jeans that he had with him and quickly changed in the barn.

"What do you think?" she asked, giving a twirl. For one so petite, her legs were actually quite long, though she'd had to roll the trousers up somewhat to shorten them.

"You look fetching, beloved," he smiled, giving her a push up to get her mounted on the pony.

"Right my friends, let's away to the hills," announced Elmor, leading the way.

"See you later, Mollie," he waved, blowing her a kiss.

The first few hours of the ride were quite jolly, really, with the amiable Elmor leading them in song for a good part of the way as they climbed into the hills. But come lunch time, when they dismounted to have a brew up and a bite to eat, only then did they all realize just how stiff they were around the nether regions. And Randal was beginning to wish he'd left his computer behind as he eased the heavy haversack off his back. Minus a monitor and a suitable power supply, it wasn't going to be of much use to him out in the wilds of the Outlands. Come to think of it, he wasn't even sure if they actually had electricity there. Still, it might prove useful to them if and when they eventually made it into the Freelands. A bizarre thing to carry around with you? Well, perhaps no more bizarre or obsessive than a plumber or carpenter carrying around his bag of tools. Hopefully it would provide him with a livelihood.

Still, they made more progress after lunch. They were over the hills now and descending through the wooded valleys toward the plain off in the distance.

They reached the plain around five thirty that day, with the sun just beginning to go behind the hills.

"Well, we've made it," Elmor beamed triumphantly. "My

friends, say goodbye to Gothgoria and welcome to the Outlands.”

The party took a rest there for a few brief minutes, whilst they answered the call of nature, then pressed on, arriving at the village of South Gussup at around six thirty. Elmor left them with the ponies whilst he went inside to announce their arrival.

“Yes, we’re expected. Off you go inside and get yourselves freshened up, then I’ll join you in the dining room once I’ve settled the ponies in the paddock.

“Oh, and if you’re buying, mine’s a pint of best bitter, by the way,” he laughed.

Well, having been brought safely this far, and in such high spirits, they could hardly say no, really. Still flush with money, Logan paid for Elmor’s lodgings there for the night, too. It was the least they could do.

Now more saddle sore than ever and quite weary from the journey, they all turned in early. Randal tried his best not to look like someone who’d just received invasive surgery to his rectum as he walked painfully upstairs to bed with Heléna.

Needless to say, they were fast asleep almost before their heads hit the pillow and didn’t stir or wake until Elmor called them bright and far too early the next morning.

“Well, I’ll be heading back now,” the man told them as they polished off their breakfast, which included two extra rounds of thick toast and chunky, home-made marmalade. “I’m not sure when or where you’ll be moving next, but I’m reliably informed that the matter is in-hand – you won’t be left marooned here.

“Your contact’s name goes by the name of Streiker, that’s all I know. Anyhow, I’ll bid you a fond farewell. Take care my young friends, and may God go with you.”

“If God is ‘all and everything’, then he can hardly do much else,” reflected Dave once Elmor had left. Hastily adding as he spotted Logan’s frown. “Not that I’m complaining, mind. He seemed a decent enough chap.”

13. The Outlands

They fully expected to be billeted at South Gussup for days, perhaps even weeks. Determined to make the most of the good weather and lush green scenery, however, Heléna and Randal had the landlady make them up some sandwiches and a flask of lemonade, which was an optional service on offer at the guest house, and they set out shortly after breakfast, to walk along the river bank and explore the area.

Though lacking in amenities, even by the relatively backward standards of Gothgoria, the countryside around here was unspoilt. The old dry stone walls and thick hedgerows separating the fields and the squat stone cottages must have been quite ancient and, but for periodic restoration, had probably stood there largely unchanged for centuries. It was like stepping back in time to an idyllic, rustic bygone age.

Around eleven o'clock that morning, they decided that they'd probably gone far enough down river and settled down by the riverbank to take in the scenery and share a welcome cuddle. Already feeling a little peckish after their early breakfast, they ate at noon in the shade of a splendid weeping willow which overhung the river's edge, staying there for perhaps an hour, without a care in the world, before beginning the lengthy trek back to the village.

"Where've you been?" came Dave's cry when they finally got back, around four o'clock that day. He seemed uncharacteristically anxious. "We've been looking all over for you."

"I'm sorry, but we just went for a walk, that's all," retorted Heléna, with an equally uncharacteristic sharp edge. "Is that a crime?"

Dave was a little taken aback by the tone of her response. His own tone softened instantly and he apologized.

"Streiker is here and wants to see us all," he told them, and they followed him up the garden path at the front of the guest house and through into the lounge.

As they entered, a figure arose from one of the chairs and

turned to greet them. “Marion Streiker,” she introduced herself, coming forward to shake their hands. She was a good six inches taller than Dave, who stood quite dwarfed beside her, and quite elegant and businesslike in her black jacket, matching skirt and white blouse. “And – now let me get this right – you must be Heléna and Randal.”

Well that was a turn out for the books. When Randal had first heard the name Streiker, for some reason he'd pictured a man, perhaps an ex-army type; certainly not a woman. They shook hands and exchanged greetings, apologizing profusely for keeping her waiting.

“Oh, that's no trouble,” the lady smiled. “The time hasn't been wasted. I've been jotting down a few details about your friends here and taking their photograph.”

“Photographs?”

“For your papers.”

Randal looked around to make sure they were alone. “I thought – well, I presumed – that you'd just smuggle us into the Freelands ...”

“Well, as yet I'm not sure how we'll get you across, though I'm hoping that given the current exodus and thousands massing in makeshift camps along the border with Gothgoria, that the authorities' attention and resources will be focussed elsewhere.

“Oh, and you needn't worry about being overheard. There are no other guests here at the moment and Missus Moffitt is 'in the know.' If there's anything you need or if you have any concerns, feel free to consult her.

“What concerns me more is not getting you over the border but what happens then. The Freeland authorities have clamped down even harder in recent months and what we need are forged papers that will pass muster, hence the photographs. And above all you will need plausible, indeed watertight, storylines, hence the long list of questions.

“You should fully expect and be prepared for random checks, both on the way to your destination and, once there, as you go about your everyday affairs. With the authorities becoming quite paranoid and defensive about illegal immigration, what was once the exception, I regret to say, is rapidly becoming the norm. Without yourselves succumbing to paranoia, you will need to

remain vigilant and to expect the unexpected.

Marion Streiker clapped her hands together. “Anyhow, back to work. Heléna, perhaps you'd come and sit with me whilst we wade through the questions and I get to know you a little better?” Then: “Logan, would you be a dear? You're familiar with photography, by all accounts. Here's my camera. Take Randal and get a shot of his head and shoulders, would you? Something quite formal, not a happy holiday snap. Thank you, that'll save us some time.”

Interviews eventually over, Marion Streiker collected her papers together and got up to leave. “Well, thank you all for your time and patience. I'll drive up to Froggingham this evening and bright and early tomorrow I'll have a friend develop the photographs for me. Give me a couple of days to prepare the paperwork. What day is it today? Tuesday? Tomorrow's Wednesday. Sorry, I'm just thinking aloud here. Thursday, Friday ... Let's say that you can expect to hear from me again sometime on Saturday morning.”

“You mean be ready to leave on Saturday?” asked Logan.

She shrugged. “That's up to my boss and that in turn is up to what transport can be arranged for you, so I really can't tell you that at this moment. Perhaps Saturday; perhaps the following week? I'm sorry to be so vague, but I really have no idea. Once I know myself, rest assured that I or one of my associates will let you know.

“I know it's a pain, but just try to be ready to leave at a few minutes' notice.”

“So don't venture too far?” said Randal a little sheepishly. It was a rhetorical question.

Marion Striker smiled and nodded, then made for the door. She bid them good day and drove off up the road in her car. Judging by the paintwork it was quite a flash new car, the likes of which Randal had not seen on the streets of Gothgoria, and could only dream about, though it was covered in dust from the dirt roads of the Outlands.

It was quite a long week with them more or less having to remain within earshot of the guest house, with the exception of the odd trip to the village high street; waiting, waiting, waiting on tenterhooks for news that they would be leaving. There was no

telephone at Missus Moffitt's guest house, and apparently not in the village itself, so news would presumably arrive by messenger or carrier pigeon, or something like that.

A good deal of their time was spent coaching themselves and testing one-another on their storylines, as instructed by Marion Streiker, who had told them that she could not emphasize more strongly how important it was to have plausible stories deeply etched in their minds. It had to become second nature to them.

Shrewd cookie that he was, Dave had already managed to trip Randal up on a couple of occasions in his role of holy inquisitor, and this further galvanized Randal's efforts and strengthened his resolve.

On Saturday morning, a heavy sack arrived by courier. It contained their new clothes. "You have got to be joking," muttered Dave under his breath when he found the items labelled for his use and unpacked them. "If there's one thing I *cannot* abide, it's baggy trousers."

He did a twirl. "I mean, for heaven's sake, look at this sagging crotch. You could fit a brace of ferrets in there and there'd still be room to spare. What's that going to do for my credibility, eh, I ask you?"

As for their own clothes, which might be of use to others elsewhere, these were to be consigned to the sack for later collection. Even Logan's precious gold pocket watch, bequeathed to him by a late Uncle, had to go, with much reluctance. Alas, the finely engraved inscription on the back could not easily have been explained away.

It came as a shock and yet no great surprise to Randal, that he and his beloved PC tower were to be parted. Even Dave – despite his reluctance and protestations – had to part with the hard drive that he'd stripped from his own machine.

Their nationality had been changed, too, though they could do no more than tweak their racial origins. There was nothing they could do about Heléna's gorgeous olive skin tone, for example – and perish the thought that they should – though Marion Streiker had decided that Heléna (with that wonderful foreign lilt on the second "e") should become plain Helen. She would always be Heléna to Randal, in his heart, of course, but from the day Marion Streiker had left them, he had to get

thoroughly used to calling her Helen, whilst she had to get thoroughly used to responding to that name – and only that name. And they all had to get used to looking puzzled and quizzical when words of Gothgorian dialect – like *fair dingle*, meaning “good”, “perfectly acceptable” or “yes, I’ll go along with that” depending on the context – were used in their presence. These things were so engrained and habitual, that it was no easy task to bring about this transformation – or perhaps this *transmogrification* – and at such short notice.

They were half-way through their lunch when Marion Streiker arrived that day, her car by now thoroughly caked in mud after overnight rain. It looked like she had driven far and fast, and she was in something of a hurry.

“Sorry about this,” she panted, having run up the long garden path. “Get your things, pile them in the trunk and we’ll be away. No, don’t worry about settling your bill.” She rooted in her purse and tossed a few silver coins on the table in the hallway, then looked at her watch. “We only have a little time. I’ll explain on the way.”

And with that she was off back down the garden path to open the trunk and start up the engine, anxious to be off.

As they clambered in, she passed a bulging brown envelope to Heléna who sat in the front passenger seat whilst the others squashed themselves into the back. “Your papers,” she explained, setting off with a grind of gears and a jerk.

Heléna opened the envelope and reached behind her to pass the identification cards and permits around.

Once she’d safely negotiated the narrow winding lane leading up to the village and was on the main road south, Marion began to relax and took the time to explain the retinue for the day.

“Since there are four of you, it’s going to be a little complicated,” she began. “For the life of me, I couldn’t arrange for you to all travel together, so we’re going to have to split up. David and Logan, I’ll drop you off first at a friend’s. You’ll be picked up at three o’clock this afternoon – providing we make it to your rendezvous in time – hence the rush. Randal? Since there’s not enough room to squeeze you in, I’ve arranged separate transport for you. You won’t be met until six this evening, so once we drop off David and Logan, the mad panic will be over and we

can afford to relax a little.”

“And Heléna – oh! forgive me, I mean Helen. Well, that's a good start, isn't it? – I'll be driving back into the Freelands first thing tomorrow morning and you'll be coming with me. We'll stop overnight with a dear friend of mine.”

“Where are we heading exactly?”

“A place just outside Sher Point, the capital. If you'll forgive me, I'd rather not be any more specific than that. So we'll go our separate ways today and meet up again whenever we arrive tomorrow, God willing.”

“And what if he ain't?” muttered Dave.

Marion Streiker said nothing for a time, her attention on the road ahead.

“Trust in God and tie your camel, as the saying goes. Contingency plans are in place,” she replied at length. “We'd simply make alternative arrangements.”

“Like six months in the nick if we're caught?”

“Oh do behave yourself, David,” Marion Streiker replied, though not in a severe tone.

“Don't get me wrong: hope for the best and plan for the worst, that's my motto,” he replied.

“I'm all for crossing certain bridges as and when we actually come to them,” she smiled at him through the rear view mirror.

“Me, I'm belt, braces, brown trousers and bicycle clips,” he laughed.

“Say again?”

“You really don't want to know,” grinned Logan, digging his elbow into his elder brother's ribs. “It doesn't bear explaining in polite company.”

Some time later, as they turned off the main road south and headed off down a bumpy track, Marion Streiker broke into a grin and had a little chortle to herself.

“What's tickling you?” asked Dave.

“Oh, I finally fathomed the reason for the brown trousers and bicycle clips. Listen, don't worry unduly. I haven't let anyone down yet and I've been doing this for the past five years.”

If Dave had thoughts about there always being a first time for everything, he managed to restrain himself, and he did apologize to Marion.

“David, we all have our own ways of dealing with anxiety and change,” she smiled. “It’s part of what makes us human and uniquely individual. And, yes, I know that you mean well.”

Marion drew the car up beside a stone cottage and gently peeped her horn. “Well, fellahs, this is your stop.” She got out of the car as Dave and Logan took their scant belongings from the trunk, and had a word with a figure who stood waiting for them at the gate.

“Have a safe journey. See you soon,” she waved, getting back in the car.

“Right oh, off we go again,” Marion smiled, giving one final wave as she backed the car into the driveway and turned the car back toward the main road. “Now we can relax a little. We’re a few minutes ahead of schedule and there’s a delightful little country pub on the way, so I think we might have a snack in there.”

All too soon, however, for Randal there came the parting of their ways. He climbed out of the back seat and collected his coat and his belongings from the trunk of the car. Heléna got out of the car to give a brief hug and a kiss, and then they were off down the road, leaving a dusty wake behind them. The only tenuous links he had to them now were a telephone number and a post office box number that he’d been told to remember – but on no account write down – in case something didn’t go to plan.

Rather than be smuggled in, he was to take a more direct and more dangerous route. He was taking a big enough risk, but these people were taking a far bigger risk in sending him by this route.

There was a number 36 bus due within the hour. He was to take the bus south and – if all went to plan – across the border and as far as Northmarket. Though the bus didn’t terminate there but actually went as far south as the capital, it had been decided that he should disembark at the market town. There he’d be met by a Mister Grainger who’d drive him by car the last fifty or so miles to Sher Point, the final destination.

Well, he said he was to take a more direct route: that was nothing but ignorance and optimism. In the event the journey south seemed to take an age as the battered old bus zigzagged this way and that, to take in many of the villages along the way which were either east or west of the main road. Still, it was quite a

scenic route.

All too soon, they were at the border. Randal had been reliably informed that he might expect the bus to be boarded by an official who'd check through their identification papers and travel permits before waving them on their way. As it turned out, however, a border guard came to the door of the bus and had a word with the driver. The driver left his seat and requested that all the passengers disembark, taking their belongings with them. The guard led them across the tarmac to a squat wooden building and they were told to form an orderly queue and await their turn to be called one by one.

By this time, Randal was thinking that Dave's suggestion of brown trousers and bicycle clips wasn't such a daft idea after all.

"Next," came the curt call from the doorway of the customs post. That would be him. Didn't these officials realize that they were not there to boss them around but to actually serve them?

He walked forward, hoping and praying that he wouldn't be rumbled. Strangely enough in his mind he was quite calm; but what worried him was whether he could control his body, and that he might develop a nervous tic or that his hand might start shaking. Deep breaths, Randal; slow deep breaths.

"Your documents, please," the official behind the wooden counter requested. He handed over his papers.

Then came the questions. The official only had to look through the papers to see that two weeks prior to this he'd journeyed north to attend the funeral of a relative and spend some time with his widowed mother, and that now he was returning, but still the official wanted to hear his version of the story and to check that the printed account and his verbal responses matched.

If the official got one whiff of anything untoward in his responses, there were a thousand and one further questions that he might ask which Randal would not be able to answer nor bluff his way out of. Like: "Oh, Havisham, I went to school not far away. Tell me, do they still run the Wednesday market there?" This, knowing full well that the market was always held on a Thursday.

They sometimes asked questions at random, by which means they could quickly assess whether or not there was any anxiety or hesitation and hence whether or not to pursue the questioning further.

“Randal,” echoed the man. “That’s an unusual name. Do you know where it originates?”

He shrugged instinctively. “I haven’t the faintest idea of what it might mean, though I gather I was named after my grandfather who emigrated from Hustan to the Outlands just prior to the First Great War.”

“It says here that you are a citizen of the Freelands.”

“Yes, my mother and father came between the wars and subsequently gained full citizenship. I was born after that, in ‘54.”

“I see.”

Shit, he’d nearly said ‘56 then. That was a bloody close call.

“And do you have anything to declare?”

“No,” he replied.

“May I see?” The official beckoned with his fingers and Randal placed the small leather case on the counter before him. The man opened the case and had a quick rummage round, then closed the case and pushed it back across the counter toward Randal. Then he laid the documents flat on the desk before him and thumped his stamp down on one of the pages. The stamp was green.

“Thank you, Mister Smith. Everything appears to be in order, so you may pass. *Yach doresh.*”

In that moment of relief, when he was actually most vulnerable, Randal so very nearly fell for that one, catching himself in the nick of time, even as the reply was forming on his tongue. “Come again?”

“Good day to you, Mister Smith. Next, please.”

Still quaking in his shoes, Randal headed back toward the bus, deliberately slowing his pace so as to appear more casual, whilst bubbling just beneath the surface he wanted to run.

Randal spent the rest of the journey either looking out of the bus window or pretending to doze. Just opposite him sat a rather talkative old lady and the last thing he wanted was for her to strike up a public conversation with him. He fully realized that it would only take one casual slip of the tongue to give him away. Most people would be sympathetic to the plight of the Gothgorians, no doubt, but there were always some in every population who took exception to foreigners. And it would be no

skin off their nose to report him to the authorities.

Standing there outside the bus depot at Northmarket he felt no less vulnerable, though he made an effort to look like he had a purpose in standing there, rather than looking lost.

Only when Grainger turned up and beckoned him into the car did Randal allow himself to relax.

“My word, you look quite shell shocked, if you don't mind me saying so, old chap,” the man observed as they set off.

“Tell me about it.”¹⁰

“Been a long and harrowing journey?”

“I only just made it through customs and I've been a bit rattled ever since.”

“What's the procedure there?” the man asked him, as he squeezed past a poorly parked van and took a sharp left-hander.

“I like to keep informed about such things so that we can better inform those who come along later,” he explained.

Randal gave him a blow by blow account, culminating in him so very nearly falling for the official's words on parting and him realizing how easy it would be to slip up in everyday conversation.

“Yes, that's one of the oldest tricks in the book, old chap, and you'd be surprised how many folk would fall for it, even given prior warning. These responses are more or less built into us, and automatic, you see.

“As for engaging in conversation, and much more besides, that's something we can certainly help with. I'm going to take you to a centre we operate just outside the capital. And by 'we' I mean The Network. We run a basic induction course and you'll spend a few weeks there – depending on your specific needs and your progress – becoming acclimatized to the local culture, so that when you're ready to be released into the wild, as it were, you'll be able to more easily blend in.

“Trust me, old chap, we've been in this game for a great many years now, here and there, and we've had some rather favourable results of late. It's a thoroughly tried and tested course, rather than the dabbling you'll find with so many of the amateurs who've recently begun to set up shop. You couldn't be in safer hands.”

10 I strongly agree.

Grainger suddenly put his foot on the brake pedal and swerved wildly, narrowly missing a car that had pulled out of a junction behind a parked van without looking. He banged angrily on his car horn and waved his fist.

“Having said that,” he continued, regaining his composure, “there are always the idiots – and the miscreants – gumming up the works. Thankfully most of them are simply idiots and this we can more easily take into account. As for the miscreants, well they are ever a thorn in our side, but thankfully they are least in a minority.”

A sudden thought struck Randal and he voiced it, though he wasn't quite sure why he should, other than making polite conversation: “I seem to recall reading somewhere a phrase along the lines of 'more harm is committed through acts of idiocy than through acts of evil.'”

Grainger raised his eyebrows. “Well, well, well,” he replied. “And do you remember who wrote that memorable line, by any chance?”

Randal shook his head.

“Well, it may surprise you to learn that it comes from a work entitled '*Being how to Be*' by a certain Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen.”

“I'm sorry, but neither the title nor the name ring any bells with me,” Randal admitted.

“Then it might further surprise you to learn that Tenzing is actually Director of Studies of the centre we run. I think you'll like what he has to say.”

“Small world,” Randal observed. He didn't think too long and hard about the matter, though: it had been no more than a mere passing remark.

“The shadow of scepticism is dispelled in the light of real knowledge,” came the reply and for a moment Randal was nonplussed, unsure of whether it had been he who'd had this sudden thought or Grainger who'd spoken the words, or even both.

Perhaps this was the true origin of the familiar phrase “without the shadow of a doubt”? Or nothing more than coincidence?

“There's no such thing as mere coincidence,” Grainger replied at length, bringing out of his reverie. “All things are

connected – though some connections are more productive than others.”

“You stole the words off my tongue,” Randal laughed.

“Such things happen,” the man nodded. “And you’ll probably find that happening more and more in Tenzing’s presence.”

Finally, ahead of them they could see the sprawling metropolis of Sher Point looming up before them, sitting in a wide valley at the junction of two great rivers. Grainger turned the car down a long meandering lane and perhaps a mile and a half down that lane he slowed and turned off to the right up a wide gravel driveway. A wooden sign with ornate carved calligraphy read simply “*Foxholes*”.

“Well, here we are, Randal,” the man said at last as they pulled up outside a rather grand looking building. “Home sweet home.”

As he got out, thanking Grainger for his help, Randal saw Marion Streiker’s car there and his heart skipped a beat, realizing that she and Heléna – correction, she and Helen – had made it here safely, too. A tussle-haired youth was hard at work hosing down the car and most of the thick splatters of mud had gone, to reveal the shiny black livery beneath.

“Good evening, Brian,” the man called him as he passed by, giving him a friendly pat on the shoulder: “You’re doing a fine job there, young man.”

Grainger stopped for a moment, fished in his pocket and palmed a small coin into the lad’s hand.

“Wow, thank you, Mister Grainger,” the lad beamed, going about his task with renewed gusto.

14. Foxholes

Even before Randal had reached the house, Helen was out of the front doors to greet him. She came skipping down the stone steps to throw her arms around him and shower him in kisses; so glad to see him safe and sound and so glad to have reached sanctuary.

“Well, I'll leave you two love birds to it and see you later,” smiled Grainger, heading off inside. “Melanie, would you mind looking after our new guests? Of course, if there's some other place you'd rather be”

“Certainly, Mister Grainger,” came the eager reply.

“You don't mind?”

“Not at all, sir.”

“Oh, you are a treasure. Your help is much appreciated.”

Randal and Helen walked up the steps arm in arm and their allotted guide, a girl of perhaps sixteen who'd been at the centre for some time, waited patiently until they were ready to move on, cupping her hand to her mouth to hide a stray giggle.

“Oh, I'm sorry to keep you waiting there, Melanie,” Helen apologized, seeing the girl standing there.

“Pull yourself together, Randal,” she playfully chided him, straightening herself up. “Marion and I got in about an hour ago and she settled me in. Would you rather I stayed here?”

“No, no. Come along,” he replied. “Lead the way, Melanie.”

Melanie excused herself for a few moments while she went to the office to check on the details, then returned with a pile of clean towels.

“Are those for me? Thank you. Here, let me unburden you,” offered Randal.

The girl led them across the hallway and up the long sweeping staircase to the first floor, then down a long cork-floored corridor toward the sleeping accommodation. Hardly a moment was wasted as she broadly and so fluently described the nature of the study centre and went on to enumerate the many daily and weekly routines. If anything, she provided *too much* information for Randal to fully take in.

Finally they came to the room which Randal had been allocated and Melanie opened the door and stepped aside to allow him to enter first.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” the girl stammered, seeing the clothes strewn on the bed, half-unpacked, and looking this way and that around the room. “This room is already occupied. But I'm certain that Matron said room 24. If you'll excuse me again, I'll go and double check.”

Helen laughed. “It's all right, Melanie, you have the right room and I'm the cause of your confusion. Forgive me for putting you in an awkward situation.”

The girl didn't quite follow.

“Those are my things. Matron was a little taken aback by the suggestion, but I informed her that Randal and I were together and that we would prefer to share a room.”

“Oh, I see,” the girl replied as it dawned on her what Helen was saying. Again she had to turn away to stifle an involuntary giggle.

“Well, I, um ... I'll leave you to freshen up: there's a hand basin in the corner and a bathroom at the end of the hall. When you're ready, you'll find me in the common room just past Matron's office, and I'll take you along to see Mister Grainger. You've arrived here too late for tea, but Matron said that Mister Grainger has arranged for you to have some supper in his study.

“I'd normally give you a guided tour of the main building and the new annex, but there won't be time today. However, I'm sure someone will take you round tomorrow morning.”

“Melanie, you're an angel,” Helen thanked her warmly and the girl skipped off back down the corridor, clearly happy to have been of service – and with a tale or two to tell around the common room, no doubt.

Not wishing to hold people up for longer than necessary, Randal grabbed his toiletries and stripped to the waist to have a quick wash at the hand basin whilst Helen tidied up and got changed.

“Hey, they've actually got hot running water here,” he enthused. “Luxury of luxuries.”

Then a thought occurred to him. “Good grief, I clean forgot to ask about Dave and Logan. I take it they're not here yet.”

Helen shook her head. "From what Marion told me, they're travelling economy class in two rather circuitous legs and should arrive either later tonight or sometime tomorrow morning," she replied.

He quickly dried himself on a towel and pulled on a fresh shirt, with Helen hovering at the door, anxious for them to be off.

"I know, it's usually the guys who are kept waiting by their women-folk," he admitted.

"Hey, cheeky," she gasped, giving him a playful clip around the ear.

"Okay, I'm done," he nodded, giving her a peck on the cheek and still buttoning his cuffs as he went. "Let's go find Melanie before she and Mister Grainger give us up for lost."

Striding off down the long corridor, poor Helen had to almost trot to keep up. "Sorry," he apologized, slackening his pace, "I keep forgetting that my legs are longer than yours."

They ate their supper first in Mister Grainger's study, a member of staff having made up a welcome pile of salmon sandwiches before she went off duty, and then the light chit-chat turned to weightier matters.

"Needless to say, The Network is rather worried about recent developments in Gothgoria," Harold Grainger said, broaching the subject. "We have two or three people in there, indeed I understand that you are acquainted with one of our operatives whom you know as 'David', and that he's on his way here as we speak, but for the last few days we've heard nothing through conventional channels. The new regime have rather effectively sealed their borders and gained complete control over communications.

"So any intelligence you might have would be appreciated. Don't worry about boring me or sparing me the details, you never know what might turn out to be of significance."

Between them, Helen and Randal sketched out a broad canvas for Harold and for a time he was quite content to merely sit and listen; then they moved onto specifics and they answered as best they could points about which he asked them for elaboration or clarification. The man was clearly moved by Helen's graphic account, culminating in her parents being taken away. He wanted to know more about these "enforced

repatriations” and Randal did say that he should really talk to Dave about that, since this seemed only fair and also because Dave knew far more about the matter, perhaps even more than he'd been willing to divulge to them.

“Yes, I appreciate your chivalry,” Harold nodded. “Nevertheless, since you are here and as yet David is not, tell me what you do know or what you've been told.”

Harold was clearly shocked and deeply saddened by what Randal had to tell him and for a time they sat there in silence.

Finally Harold spoke. “This has happened before, you know. Long, long ago.”

“Yes,” Helen nodded and she recounted what her father had told them about his own grandfather's warnings, and her father's grave concern not only that history was repeating itself but also that people had such short memories.

“Indeed,” Harold nodded in agreement.

“So what now?” Randal asked.

Harold shrugged. “Certainly the matter will have to be brought to our Director, Tenzing's, attention. I only have precedent to go on, but given the magnitude and seriousness of this situation I think it likely that he will convene a grand conference of his peers.”

“And what will they do?”

Again he shrugged. “It is beyond my competence and beyond my remit to attempt to second guess the Friends. But rest assured that if and when they choose to act, they will do so with great wisdom and compassion. Of that, at least, we can be certain.”

“Oh, I think they'll act on our intelligence,” came a familiar voice. All heads turned as Dave marched into the study with Logan in tow, and dumped his bag down on the floor.

“Evening all,” he smiled. Looking around the room, he spotted the drinks cabinet. “Greetings Harold, long time no see. Mind if I help myself?”

“Be my guest, David.”

“You made good time,” Helen observed.

Dave merely nodded and walked back across the room and drew up a chair. “The driver decided to press on rather than lay up overnight.”

“Intelligence?” Harold prompted, pulling his own chair

closer.

“You realize that what I'm about to tell you has to remain a secret between us?”

They all nodded. “That goes without saying,” Helen replied.

Dave downed the rest of his drink and lit a cigarette before continuing, flicking his ash in his empty glass. Harold got up and passed him an ashtray.

Dave looked toward Helen and sighed a deep sigh. “Well, I don't know how to break this to you. There's no easy way, as far as I can see.”

“Spit it out, man,” Logan chided him.

“You see, there is no enforced repatriation.”

“Of course there is,” Logan responded.

Dave shook his head vigorously. “I'm sorry to contradict you, bro', but that's just a ruse.”

“Yes, Randal has already mentioned the labour camps,” offered Harold. “It's deeply disturbing.”

They fully expected Dave to agree and to elaborate on this, but he merely sat there, peering down into his empty glass and shaking his head.

He looked up and turned toward Helen. “I'm sorry, but I haven't been entirely straight with you. I wanted to save you from further grief, you understand?”

“You said that your Uncle Albert was taken away in a green bus? Yes, the gaily painted bus tours the area and turns up on your door. Yes, people get taken away in buses and trucks, but not for enforced repatriation.”

She nodded.

“Nor to be taken to a labour camp.”

Her face flushed bright crimson. “Then for what? Where were they taken?”

Dave looked at her with sadness evident in his eyes, then drew a deep breath. “The driver goes around the neighbourhood collecting passengers. Then when he gets a full load, he starts up his bus; the gas is turned on, and it's 'Goodnight Gothgoria.' It's as simple and tragic as that.”

“They're gassed?” Helen was deeply shocked and the colour drained from her face.

Dave nodded. “Yes, the people die. Then they're carted off to

the crematorium way out of town and their bodies are burnt. Sad but true.”

“And the people in the trucks? Mama and Papa?”

Dave shrugged. “They’ll probably have met the same fate by now, one way or another. This is what Lucian euphemistically calls ‘the Final Solution’. As I said, there really is nothing we can do for these people – other than make sure that we live to eventually tell the tale, and do what we can for folk we can help, in the process.”

She sighed. “Truth be told, I think I knew that they’d be dead even without you having to tell me. Don’t worry, Dave – it hurts, oh *how* it hurts – but I can bear it.”

Helen said that in one breath, and in the next the tears began to flow again. Randal fished in his pocket and produced a handkerchief, and, going across to kneel at her feet, he gently dabbed her face.

“One thing at least,” he attempted to console her, “and I realize that it’s lukewarm comfort, but they’ll have died a pain-free death, having lived long and good lives. And they’ll live on in our hearts.”

She squeezed his hand and looked pleadingly into his eyes. “Yes,” she nodded. “And thank heavens you are here for me. I don’t think I could have managed without you.”

“Well, friends,” sighed Harold at length, rising slowly to his feet, “on that less than happy note, I think we should adjourn. David, have you and your brother eaten after your long journey?”

“Don’t worry about that, we ate on the way, thanks. All we need right now is somewhere to doss down,¹¹ though a coffee wouldn’t go amiss.”

Harold motioned toward the door. “Okay. Tell you what, let’s all go along to the common room for a quick drink, then I’ll see what I can sort out for you.”

11 Find anywhere to sleep.

15. Settling in

The following morning, Helen and Randal were up early to make use of the communal bathroom before the hordes descended on it. They showered together, in order to save time, as they didn't want to hold others up. Well, that was their story, and they were sticking to it.

They fully expected Dave and his brother Logan to still be fast asleep in bed as they passed their room, but they found the bedroom door open and the room empty, though recently occupied as evidenced by the dishevelled bedclothes and the faint after-glow of body odour and sweaty socks.

Helen summed it up in one single syllable: "Men." Grimacing and making a show of holding her nose, she went across the room and opened one of the sash windows to let in some fresh air.

The pair headed downstairs and followed the white signs on the walls in the direction of the cafeteria where they ate a hearty breakfast. The young girl, Melanie, caught their eye across the room and having eaten, and as she had mentioned the previous day, she gave them a guided tour of the rambling facilities.

As they were crossing the flagstoned path leading from the main building toward the annex which they were told housed the new library and gymnasium, they met Logan coming the other way.

"Morning," they greeted him. "Dave not with you?"

"He's spent some time here before, so he gets to skip the formalities," Logan explained. "After breakfast he borrowed one of the staff's cars and headed off to the city."

"For any special reason?" Randal asked. Chances were his visit would entail visiting an off-licence or checking out the local taverns.

Logan shook his head. "Dave didn't say, but he did look like a man on a mission.

"Anyhow, see you at ten. Apparently they have us lined up to start the induction course."

"It won't be anything taxing for the first few days," chipped

in Logan's escort. "The first day you get to meet one or two of the tutors and they sort out your paperwork and send you off to the library with a list. Just a bit of preliminary reading," she reliably informed them. "Don't worry, you'll soon get to know your way around and settle in."

They didn't see any sign of Dave until lunch. As they entered the cafeteria, Helen caught sight of him sitting on his own at one of the tables. He was hunched over, with a wholemeal sandwich in one hand and a thick book in the other. When he heard them coming, he put his book down and greeted them. Randal was relieved to see that he was actually sober after his trip into town and he looked quite bright eyed and bushy tailed.

"Anything exciting?" asked Randal, nodding toward the upturned book.

"Oh, just bringing myself up to speed with Quantum," Dave replied between large bites of his sandwich.

"What the heck's that when it's at home?" as my dear old dad would say," asked Randal.

"It's the new operating system they use over here."

"That's 'computer stuff' to you and me," Randal explained to Helen, who was looking bemused.

"Last time I was here, the only folk who had access to computers were at the University – I lectured there for a time. And now, with the advances they've made in the Freelands, I have some catching up to do."

"I see." Randal could also see that Dave had been hiding his light under a bushel. Lecturing in public was something that would have filled him with dread and left him a gibbering wreck, and he greatly admired those who had this ability.

"Can you believe it, though: they only have the one modem in the place. The machine's in the library and the only way you can get to use it is to book in advance. Well, I thought 'sod that for a game of soldiers' and buggered off down town to buy myself a modem. There's a desk going begging in one of the staff offices and a phone line."

"Your aim being?"

Dave pushed himself up in his seat and leant forward to speak in more hushed tones. "My aim being to see what the guys on Comms Net have to say about recent events, and to get back in

touch with Henry and Lucinda. Mail doesn't seem to be getting through and the phone line goes dead when you dial the code for Gothgoria. Apparently Harold Grainger is in touch with a friend who operates an amateur radio, but he's not getting any response from over the border. So Comms Net seems to be one of the few remaining options. That is if they haven't shut that down, too."

Dave waved the instruction manual in the air. "And that brings us back to the need to read up about Quantum. I managed to locate a spare PC, but it's sadly lacking in the warez department. So I'm just finding out how to fit the modem and, having hunted down the disks, how to install the new operating system.

"I'd far sooner have my own machine," Dave lamented. "That was easy: I had my own tried and tested patent procedure"

"What's that?" asked Helen.

"I call it *Plug and Pray*."

Randal had to smile, knowing exactly what Dave meant, though this in-joke was of course lost on Helen. Dave was forever taking off the metal cover of his trusty old PC and fiddling around with the works inside. He was overclocking the processor and had got it up to a whopping eight million cycles per second before it finally conked out. "Just needs a bigger fan, that's all," he'd responded philosophically as the screen suddenly went blank and the wisps of smoke began to rise.

"But Quantum is a whole new ball game," Dave added, taking a slurp of his coffee.

"Well, I wish you luck," Randal smiled, finishing off his soup and checking his watch. "Anyhow, we'll leave you to it. Helen and I have to visit the library. We have a whole heap of background reading of our own to do before we begin the induction course next week. Oh, and we also have our very own meditation class. I guess they must have thought we needed calming down a bit."

"Okee dokee,"¹² said Dave, going back to his manual. "I'll catch you later. And don't dismiss the meditation lightly, Randal: I'm sure that it will do you both a heap of good, not only for its obvious advantages in the short term, but also as a long term

12 Okay; that's fine by me.

investment. It'll really help to open you up and assist in many areas of your life.”

Having been issued with their library tickets, Randal and Helen waded through the list of suggested reading material and gradually amassed their collection. Being a couple, they managed to halve their burden by sharing copies rather than doubling up. Since it was such a pleasant day outside, they checked out the books and went off to begin reading on a park bench by the lily pond in the grounds.

Three hours later, Helen was still reading, though Randal must have dozed off at some point for the next thing he knew, she was shaking his arm and telling him that it was time for tea. She laughed. “Oops, looks like your forehead and cheeks have caught the sun. We'll have to see if Matron has some cream in her medicine chest.”

They saw Dave briefly as they sat and ate with Logan and one or two other mature students. He was waiting in line to be served, but rather than come and join them, he headed out of the cafeteria, taking his tray with him.

“Man on a mission?” Randal enquired.

Logan laughed. “Absolutely. Apparently Quantum comes with a whole stack of floppy installation disks. Twenty five to be precise, or so I'm reliably informed. Dave thought he was going to get off lightly until he discovered that they were actually double sided, an additional problem being that the drive in the old PC was only single sided, so he had to make a second trip into town. Needless to say, he'll be kept busy for some time to come.”

After tea, Randal and Helen thought they might drop-by to see how Dave was getting on. Having located the office he had temporarily requisitioned, they popped their heads in the door to find him sitting in the dark before a glaring computer screen, snoring away.

“Poor love, let's leave him to it,” Helen said, about to leave the room.

Randal looked at the blue screen. There was a message written across it which read “Insert disk 21, then press [Enter]”. On one side of the desk was a whole heap of disks turned the other way up, indicating that he'd done with them; on the other side were four remaining disks, the top one labelled “Quantum –

21”.

“Maybe we should rouse him? If I were him, I'd be a little miffed to wake up in the middle of the night and find that there was still work to finish off.”

“We could always leave him sleeping and insert disk 21 on his behalf” she suggested. “Then he could have his cake and eat it, as it were.”

Randal sucked in his lips. “I wouldn't dare.”

Suddenly Dave jerked awake and looked anxiously around. His eyes gradually focussed and he saw them standing there. “Rats, I must have nodded off,” he observed, reaching for his cigarettes. The ash tray to his left was already full of half-smoked dog ends.

Finally returned to his senses, Dave removed the previous disk, tossing it to one side, inserted the next and hit the [Enter] key, as requested, and for a time the disk drive chuntered away.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, lighting up a second cigarette and turning to face them.

“Oh, we just wondered how you were getting on, that's all,” Helen replied. “Is there anything we can do for you?”

Dave peered into the bottom of his empty mug. “If it's not too much trouble, I could do with a coffee. I'd go myself but as you can see”

“No problem,” smiled Helen and, taking the mug, she headed off toward the cafeteria.

At that moment, the disk drive faltered and a red warning message popped up on the screen. “Unable to read such-and-such a file on the disk” it read, and gave him several options such as Abort, Retry or Skip. “Confounded thing. God, I sometimes hate computers,” he cursed, popping the disk out of the drive. He examined the disk closely and brushed away a stray hair, then reinserted it and hit “R” for Retry. This seemed to work and the drive began to clunk away quite merrily again. “Sometimes the mere threat of a hammer works; sometimes they just need a little TLC,” he smiled, with a shrug of his shoulders.

As they passed on the way to supper that evening, they found him still hard at work and on their return they took him fresh provisions.

“Disk 22 was a bugger,” Dave told them.

“Thanks. How much do I owe you?”

“No charge.”

“Disk 22?”

“Yes, the bloody thing was shot. I had to go get the caretaker to open up the library for me, so that I could copy some of the files directly from the machine in there. Grumpy old sod, he was. 'More than me job's worth,' he says. Anyhow, I managed to borrow a set of keys from Harold Grainger.”

“What a carry on. It took quite a bit of running around, because I couldn't read the directory to find out which files were meant to be on the disk. All I could do was wait until an error popped up, jot down the name of the file and whiz off to the library in the annex to locate it. Then I'd copy that file across using a spare floppy and go through the same ruddy procedure for the next file. Why me, eh? What did I ever do to deserve this shit on my watch, eh, I ask you?”

Though commiserating with him, they begged their leave, and left Dave huffing and puffing away as they headed off upstairs to bed.

Randal was about to turn over and go to sleep but Helen had other ideas. She stood there at his side of the bed to undress, slipping out of her skirt and letting it fall to the floor. She looking so cute in her long white blouse and black stockings and suspenders, quickly gaining his full and undivided attention. Needless to say, it was some time before they finally settled down, feeling quite drunk from making love, to enjoy a good night's slumber.

16. No reply, was the answer

The next day, Randal was still a little squiffy from the antics of the night before; he felt so calm and seemed to be floating along on an invisible cushion of air. It was like being drunk without the hangover; or stoned without the downer.

Dave was up with the larks again that morning and came to sit with them and Logan.

"You're looking rather chipper this morning, Dave," Helen observed as he tucked into his bacon and eggs with gusto.

"Chipper?" he queried.

"You look cheerful and lively; full of confidence."

"It's a wonder. I was up into the early hours," he replied.

"Any luck?"

"Well, I got Quantum installed okay. Twenty five ruddy double sided disks. Most of the stuff that got installed was neither use nor ornament to me. Software they call it: more like *bloatware*, if you ask me. Still, I guess I can't complain, since between you and me – cough, cough – it did come free."

"So you're up and running?"

"I got there eventually, once I'd figured out where to find the control panel. It took me a while to discover why the modem wasn't working. Turned out there was a hardware clash with the sound card. Anyhow, I managed to get that sorted out."

"So you've been on Comms Net?"

"Not as yet. I thought I'd save the best 'til last and turned in for the night. Besides, there wouldn't have been many other folk on Comms Net at three o'clock in the morning. I'll have a look see after breakfast and let you know how I get on."

Dave cut carefully around the yolk of his friend egg, first eating the white, then popping the yolk in his mouth, whole. And with that, leaving his empty tray on the table, he was off down the corridor and back to work.

When Helen and Randal met up with Dave again, at tea time that day, his mood was a little more sombre.

"How are things?" asked Helen, first to notice this change of mood. She had a good sense for other people's feelings.

“Which would you like first?” he asked: “The good news or the bad?”

“That's up to you, Dave.”

“Well, the bad news is, there *is* no good news,” he replied, then apologized. “Sorry, that was a little flippant of me.”

“Like that, is it?”

“Okay, the good news is that I managed to get on Comms Net. Fortunately, and call me anal retentive if you must, I have this knack for remembering configurations: things like addresses, user names and passwords.”

“I successfully logged into the University's system at Sher Point. Whilst I was out yesterday I popped in the computer department and an old mate set up an account for me. They're linked up to the internet, so all I have to do is dial into their system and I can get access to the net via their system.”

“Excellent work,” Randal enthused.

“And the bad news?” asked Helen.

“Well, I can access any number of sites in the Freelands, no problem. But when it comes to checking out sites in Gothgoria, it's like there's a colossal black hole sucking everything in. I send the requests and nothing comes back, not even a response from their servers to say that the web site or requested page is unavailable or that access is denied.”

“I take it you tried Comms Net?” Randal prompted. It was a rhetorical question.

“Yep, that's still up and running – this side of the border. I've looked at some of the message boards and newsgroups and there's been nothing but silence from our Gothgorian friends for the last five days. And that silence, to me, speaks volumes.

“There are one or two notable exceptions, which only reinforces my belief that something fishy is going on.” Dave added. “And that is that the official sites of the Patriotic Workers' Freedom Party and the Ministry of Information are still up and running.”

“What about the media?”

“*The Daily Globe* is up, but their archives seem to have been taken off-line and the stories they're running are pro-P.W.F.P. Though it tended to lean toward socialist values, *The Daily Globe* has always prided itself on its independence and its investigative

journalism, and I can only surmise from this that the paper is now under state control.”

Dave was just getting up to leave the table when something occurred to Helen. “If you can get access to those sites, and I’m sorry that I don’t know the correct terms to use, doesn’t that mean that they haven’t as it were, blocked communication at the border? I mean, they haven’t pulled the plug on the telephone exchange. Do you get what I’m trying to say? It looks like they’re just being selective about what you can access from here.”

Dave sat down again and for a time he appeared lost in thought, then he suddenly looked up and clapped Helen gently on the back. “You know, that’s very perceptive. You may indeed have something there.”

Again he thought for a moment. “I guess the question is whether they’ve shut down the web sites in the country or whether the things are still up and running but cut off from the rest of the network at our side of the border. Thank you, I’ll have to give that some thought.

“Anyhow, that can wait for another day. How would you and Logan fancy an evening out at the pub?”

“Is that allowed?” asked Randal. “I thought perhaps they might not like us venturing far afield until we were better trained, in case we gave the game away?”

“I was thinking about the pub up the road. Carole and Wayne, the couple that run the place, are ‘in the know’ and there are two or three quiet snugs in there where we wouldn’t be overheard.”

“Perhaps you might ask permission on our behalf?” Helen ventured. “Who’s in charge here, anyway?”

“Well, Matron has a say, though she tends to concentrate on the younger students. With Tenzing away, Harold Grainger will be deputizing.”

“I think you would get short shrift from Matron, to be honest,” Randal observed. “Maybe you should ask Harold Grainger, then?”

“Okee dokee. You go and get changed and powder your nose and all that jazz while I check with number two.”

Dave found them in their room a few minutes later. They were just finishing off their preparations. Judging by his bland expression, their request had been denied. “Sorry folks. Well you

can't say I didn't try."

"Another time, maybe," shrugged Randal, pulling off his tie and unbuttoning his shirt collar.

Dave's face cracked. "Just kidding. Number two said yes, under one condition."

"Which is?"

"That he comes along and buys the first round."

"Sorted!" Helen smiled, skipping across the room and giving Dave a friendly hug. "As you yourself would say: 'Well done, that man.'"

Dave helped Harold get the drinks in when they arrived at the pub while Randal and Helen found a quiet corner overlooking the back garden. Harold wanted to know how they were settling in, of course, but sure enough before long, and since there were no other drinkers within earshot, the topic turned to the trouble in Gothgoria. Dave brought Harold up to speed about his latest findings, and rather chivalrously prompted Helen to reiterate the idea she's expressed earlier.

"You know, it's sometimes easier to visualize these things with the aid of a picture," reflected Harold. He took up a couple of bar mats and laid them side by side. "The red beer mat is the Freelands," he said. "The green bar mat, that's Gothgoria. The crack between them is the border.

"This stray peanut is your machine, Dave, and the salt shaker is the local University through which you gain access to the Comms Net network.

"Over here, in Gothgoria, symbolized by the pepper pot is the Nasty Party's system; and this other stray peanut is one of our friends. Let's say Lady Lucinda. With me so far?

"You can access the Nasty Party's system via the local University. And across the border Lucinda can most likely also access the Nasty Party's system. The problem is that you can't connect to Lucinda directly."

Dave was nodding his head and giving this some thought.

"Let's put it another way," he said at length. "If my hunch is correct, then we can both connect to the network, though only at our side of the border"

Helen's eyes lit up. "What we need is a willing or an unwitting go-between," she suggested. "Some kind of 'proxy'?"

“I like that. Yes, you could call it that,” Dave nodded vigorously, tussling Helen's hair. “I'd be very wary about using the Nasty Party's system, since they might be closely monitoring it, but perhaps some other site. What we need to do is find a system accessible from here but based in Gothgoria that could be used to relay traffic to a site which it can access but we can't directly. If it's still up-and-running, access to Comms Net on their side of the border.”

Dave has a swig of his drink. “Chances are that most servers won't be configured to allow messages to be relayed via their systems, but perhaps there are some that are poorly configured and will. The problem would be in locating these potential 'proxy servers'”.

“Time for another drink,” he announced, fishing for his wallet. “Anyone fancy a bag of crisps or a packet of nuts?” Dave was forever munching one thing or another, though it didn't show in his figure. He most likely burnt all the calories off through sheer nervous energy and through all the whizzing around he did. He seemed unable to sit still in one place for more than five minutes. Randal was like that himself as a kid. “Got ants in yer pants?” as his father would enquire from time to time.

When Dave returned shortly afterwards he had a gleeful smile on his face. “I'll pop back into the city tomorrow and hunt out my friend at the University and see what ranges of numerical addresses have been allocated to Gothgoria. Then what we need to do is write some of utility to scan through those addresses”

The others were looking at bit bemused by this point, but Randal was still with him.

“What you need to do is send yourself a test request. You bounce the request off each address in turn. If it disappears into the ether or it's rejected, you cross that server off your list. And if the request is relayed back to you, you know you've got yourself a possible 'proxy server'”

Dave raised his glass and touched it to Randal's. “Precisely. And, hopefully, that's where you come in, Randal. Can you knock me up a utility that would accomplish this?”

This was right up his street. He nodded. “Providing you can get hold of a copy of something like Xasm or Xbasic for me: whatever newfangled gizmo runs on Quantum.”

“Consider it done.”

Randal stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I’m guessing, of course. Things could well have moved on and maybe they’ve developed high level ‘wrappers’ for the kind of low level calls we’d have to make to the modem.”

Dave agreed. “As far as I can make out, with Quantum, rather than calling hardware directly, you load device drivers into memory and make calls to functions in those drivers. They perform the low level stuff, without the need to keep reinventing the wheel.”

Helen exchanged glances with Harold Grainger and they both raised their eyebrows.

“Right, that’s hopeful. Well whatever the method I’m going to need info. Precisely what info, I don’t know. All I can say is that I’ll know it when I see it.”

Dave laughed. “Yes, I thought you might say that. I had a look through the guide that came with the modem, but as far as I can tell it’s aimed at the user rather than the programmer. Well, tomorrow’s Saturday and school’s out. How’s about you come along to the University with me and with a bit of luck my old buddy Craig will be able to point you in the right direction.”

“Okay, I’ll go along with that.”

“Sorted.”

“You’re not going to drag me along, are you? I can only handle so much technobabble,” said Helen screwing her face up.

Randal shook his head. “No, ‘course not.” Her remark actually took him by surprise and jolted him. It was the first time that the two of them had had a disagreement in the many months they’d spent together, and that worried him. They were in a new environment now and he was scared by the prospect of them drifting apart; ever mindful of his split from Louise.

Helen seemed to pick up on his discomfort almost instantly. She gave him a little wink and surreptitiously reached under the table to gently stroke his leg reassuringly.

“As long as you promise not to drag me round all the shops,” Randal added.

“Cheeky,” she laughed.

Harold Grainger came to the rescue. “Helen, if you’re at a loose end, my wife and I are going for a drive to Ulsgrave

tomorrow morning. It's a delightful little market town. We'll have a walk around and feed the ducks; have a bite to eat; do a bit of shopping at the street market. If you fancy that, you're welcome to come along"

"Why, thank you. Yes, I'd like that very much," she nodded.

Then Harold had another thought. "Tomorrow evening, for any who are interested in coming along, we'll be showing a film in the library. An action packed thriller, so I'm told, starring Shaun Michaels and Vanessa Steinbeck."

Helen appeared to be in two minds about that. Action movies were not really her thing.

Of course, her reaction didn't pass Harold Grainger by unnoticed. "The film is directed by an old friend of ours, so who knows what deeper and more subtle messages may come across?"

"That sounds more like it," she nodded eagerly.

"And on Sunday, as you may have heard, there'll be an all day seminar, held under the auspices of the Cultural Research Fellowship, to which all are cordially invited. And in the evening, we'll be showing another film by one of our old boys. I'm sure you'll find it quite enlightening."

"Anyhow," Harold said at length, sipping the remnants of his pint whilst Logan caught up. "I think it's time we were heading back. With Tenzing away I still have a bit of paper work to catch up on and we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow. Thank you for your delightful company, friends. And your determined efforts on our behalf."



Dave and Randal left the Computer Science Department at the University that day, Randal weighed down by reference books and a stack of disks kindly loaned to him, and headed for the car. All Craig wanted in return was a copy of the proxy scanning utility when Randal had finished it.

"Well, I'm certainly grateful for your suggestion, Dave," Randal smiled. "Your friend Craig certainly knows his stuff. Given time I'd maybe have figured it all out, but he's certainly saved me a good deal of head banging."

"What do you think of his suggestion?" he asked Dave.

"I'm in two minds about that. If we get the thing up and running, find a proxy and connect via that, chances are that the

little bit of network traffic we generate will pass unnoticed. That's the up side. The down side is that let's say we get through to the fragment of Comms Net still hopefully connected to the University in Gothgoria and we find a whole heap of juicy messages. I can see us being used as go-betweens ourselves, shuttling messages back and forth."

"Now, what Craig proposes is that, given a copy of the scanner, he reconfigures the network, so that instead of linking up to the University in Gothgoria directly, since that line of communication is down, he links up via a proxy. The up side of that is that the two halves of Comms Net are fixed together again. Once that link is established, Craig's machine will send a request for any unread messages on the newsgroups that the Gothgorian system has in its data banks; and the Gothgorian machine will send a request for any messages that Craig has on his system. The two systems will once again synchronize."

"And the down side of that approach?" Dave had probably figured this out for himself by now, but wanted to hear Randal say it.

"The downside is that someone might notice the increased traffic, check through their server logs and spot that something untoward is happening. At which point they may take action to seal the breach in their defences and maybe shut us out completely. So that would be a helluva gamble, and a decision I'd be reluctant to take on my own initiative, without first consulting others."

"Well, it's really a matter for Tenzing, the Director," Dave decided after some thought. "At the end of the day it will be his executive decision. He's a wise and shrewd enough cookie, but the problem is that when it comes to things like computers, he's pretty clueless ... and he'll be looking to me for technical advice, rather than the other way around, which of course brings us back round to where we started."

"I can picture the scene now and I know what he's going to say: 'David, you're an old hand at this sort of thing. I trust your judgement. Just tell me what you require and we'll act as you see fit.'"

When they got back to *Foxholes* it was still quite early and the others were probably just finishing their mid-morning coffee.

Helen had gone off with Harold Grainger and his wife and wouldn't be back until late afternoon, but he had faithfully promised Helen that he'd be available to have tea with her and take her to see the film in the evening. So while Dave went off to rustle up a mug of coffee and a few biscuits for them – brain food as he called it – Randal got stuck in.

Under normal circumstances he'd have sat himself down and methodically worked his way through the programming manuals, reading through from A to Z. But there was a sense of urgency about the task and no time for that kind of rigorous approach. Instead he'd have to adopt a more intuitive tactic which he termed “suck it and see.”

Once he'd got the computer booted up and QBasic installed, he'd start writing the utility and whenever he came across something he couldn't quite fathom about the programming language or about calling the modem driver, then he'd flick through the manuals to find the answer to that specific issue.

And when the thing was written, again dispensing with any kind of formal planning such as flow diagrams, he'd give it a test and any bugs that cropped up, he'd fix on the fly.

Randal had worked this way on numerous occasions and had generally found that you could take a task that might normally have been scheduled for completion in a couple of weeks and have the basics written out within the hour and the thing up and running within a day. Then, if you so desired, you could go back and look at the thing with a more critical eye and optimize it and tweak it and add bells and whistles to your heart's content.

Dave sat and watched for a time, but he clearly didn't feel comfortable in the role of passenger, so he went off about his business and left Randal to it.

By three o'clock that day, working without a break, the task was complete. While he'd been beavering away at coding, given the ranges of numerical addresses allocated to the Gothgorians, Dave had produced a data file of these addresses which the program could call.

“Okay,” Randal announced, lighting up a cigarette and passing his tobacco pouch to Dave. “I think we're ready to give this baby a whirl.”

He took the data disk from Dave, inserted it in the drive and

tapped away at the keyboard. The screen cleared and the scan commenced. Every five seconds or so, a numerical address would be printed on the screen and after a brief delay a message would be displayed beside the address: words like “no reply” and “refused”. A few seconds after that, a new line would appear and the screen would scroll. Thus far, as they sat watching the screen, all they could see was the word “no reply”, repeated over and over again.

“Do we have to sit here and jot down the positives before they disappear off the screen?” Dave wanted to know.

Randal shook his head. “No, they get saved to a text file on the hard drive.”

“Well, that's a relief. We could be here until the Harvest Holiday at this rate.”

Another thought crossed Dave's mind. “Surely we don't have to wait until the scan's complete before we can check through for any positives?”

Randal pointed to the cable stretching down the back of the desk and across the floor to an old printer that stood on a chair in a corner of the room. “I hooked up a printer,” he told Dave. “If we locate any positives, they'll get printed out. It's seen better days and the ink's a bit faint but it's legible.”

Dave beamed and patted him on the back. Then a thought seemed to occur to him and he reached for a pen and pad of paper.

“Okay, so although all the addresses allocated to Gothgoria won't have been used, we don't know which, so basically that's 65,536 addresses to wade through.”

He paused for a few moments to check his watch as the lines were written to the screen.

“And it looks like it takes around five seconds to complete each request on average.”

Dave scribbled away on the pad. “That's 327,680 seconds, which is, hang on a minute ... 5461 minutes in old money.” A broad grin crossed his face. “You do realize that it's going to take around ninety hours to complete the scan. That's nearly four days; though, of course, if there are any proxies out there, we can expect them to start showing up a lot sooner.”

“Ah ...”

“If the power went off, would we lose all our data?”

“No, it's saved as we go along. And if the power went off, we could pick up from the point we'd got to, we wouldn't have to go through the whole list of addresses again. And, yes, I've remembered to keep flushing the disk and printer buffers.”

“Good. Well, in which case, I suggest we stick a large note on the monitor warning people not to unplug or tamper with the machine. Then we might as well bugger off, find Logan and see if Helen's back yet. I wouldn't like to see you and her falling out.”

“Nor would I.” The prospect of drifting apart from Helen and breaking up, as he had with Louise, was always somewhere in the back of his mind, and it caused him some concern. “Right you are, Dave.”

Randal tidied up the mess and clutter that had been piling up while he'd been working and Dave helped him take their empty mugs back to the cafeteria.



Impatiently champing at the bit, Dave went to check the printer on the hour, every hour for the remainder of the day, even dashing across to the main building during the intermission whilst they were in the library watching the film.

“No dice?” asked Randal as Dave came scurrying back into the library and shuffled past the adjoining chairs to take his seat. He didn't have to say anything; the cheesed-off look on his face said it all, really.

On their way back to their rooms, Dave stopped-by the office for one last check before turning in for the night, and Helen and Randal paused in the corridor and waited for him to catch them up.

They heard a loud “Whoopee!” erupt from the room and Dave came dashing out. He stood there, almost jumping up and down on the spot.

“Give me a minute, would you?” Randal asked Helen.

“Just a minute, then,” she replied. “I don't want you up all night, beloved ... at least not up all night pouring over a computer screen. See you soon.” And with a kiss and a playful pat on his backside, she was off upstairs.

Dave had disappeared back into the office and Randal went to see the cause for celebration. Going over to the printer he could

see three lines of faint purple ink. Dave had jotted down the addresses and was sitting at the computer, impatiently tapping his fingers on the desk.

“Can we put this thing on pause and start it up again before we go to bed?” he asked.

Randal lent across the desk and hit the [Escape] key, returning the system to a command prompt.

“Now we're cooking!” Dave enthused, tapping away feverishly at the keyboard. “If I can get through, then we've proved that your scanner works. That being the case, I'll need a copy of your program on disk and I'll take it round to Craig's place sometime tomorrow, or maybe Monday morning.”

Randal pointed to the floppy disks sitting on top of the PC tower. “You can borrow those and he can make a copy. The source code is on one, the compiled executable's on the other. And maybe you could return the books he lent me, with my thanks? If he needs help, all he has to do is type 'scan slash help' at the command prompt and it'll bring up the instructions, such as they are.”

“I presume you'll be up most of the night, Dave?”

“If I can get through.”

“Well, I don't want to push my luck with Helen, so if it's okay with you I'm going to turn in. Anyhow, good hunting.” Helen could be a little possessive, though given what had befallen her mama and papa, and how close she had been to them, given that great loss, who could really blame her? Without meaning to sing his own praises, indeed at Helen's own admission, she would have been utterly lost and desolate without him, though of course, now that she was in these new surroundings, she was beginning to blossom once more, and her social dynamic was also shifting.

“Cheers, mate,” waved Dave, going back to his work.



At around three o'clock that morning, Randal had to pay an urgent visit to the loo down the corridor and he'd just pulled on his dressing gown and stepped out of the bedroom when he saw the unmistakable figure of Dave turning in to his own room, having been up half the night. And at breakfast the following day, Logan complained of being disturbed by Dave who'd tripped over some clothes strewn on the floor, awakening him. Apparently,

unable to sleep, Dave had risen at around seven, saying that he was going to borrow a bicycle from the sheds and ride into the city on an errand. Presumably that was to pay a call on his old friend Craig, which was all very reassuring. It would probably be a two hour bike ride into the city and maybe longer on the way back, since it was slightly uphill most of the way, so Dave wouldn't be back for some time.

After breakfast, Randal popped-in momentarily to check the printer, and was as pleased as punch to find that the scanner was running again and that they had two more addresses to add to their list.

17. The shadow of scepticism

That morning, he and Helen helped set out the wooden chairs in the library in preparation for that day's seminar, as the organizers and one or two of the speakers began to arrive. Then they took some time out to have a quiet walk through the grounds and to practise the breathing exercises they'd been prescribed, until it was time for them to return and take their seats.

The exercises certainly helped to clear Randal's mind and to make him feel far more relaxed and at peace with himself, and that cleared a space for other, more beneficial elements to enter his life, that had previously been either been outside of his awareness or else blocked. It was still early days for him, and yet he seemed to sense that there was something lingering in the air, like the subtle and delicate scent of another, perhaps former life and richer, heightened way of being. It was the aroma of something real and quite close by, which he somehow recognized, of which he could not as yet avail himself. Perhaps from being locked in the mind, it was a return to the senses? That's as near as he could come to describing this tantalizing sensation.

There was a paved area by the old well in one corner of the grounds and a giant, outdoor chess set, and they'd often spend their lunchtimes or early evenings studiously playing chess. There was a time when Randal would have to pull his punches to give Helen a fighting chance, but those days had passed. Helen's play was becoming better and better by the day, and not only did she now give him a run for his money, Helen had actually surpassed his level of concentration and skill and it was *she* who was giving *him* the occasional concession and making him feel more and more like Mister Average. Yes, it was a worry to him: not that Helen should be growing – that was a joy to behold – but certainly that, as far as he could see, he was not. He appeared to have come to a quite low-lying plateau.

Randal realized that he had been resting on his laurels for far too long, laurels which were perhaps not as well deserved as he might at one time have imagined. There were some really clever and evolved people around him and now he seriously had to up

his own game if he were to keep pace not only with their relationship but also with life in general at *Foxholes*. He didn't want to finally emerge from *Foxholes* with yet another disappointing school report which read: "Could have done better." Thus far, that was the story of his life.

Well, thus far and no farther.

Eventually everyone was settled in at the seminar, with the inevitable exception of a few stragglers. Fortunately, most of these had the sense and good manners to slip quietly into seats at the back, though there were one or two who held up the proceedings. Their heads ducked down, and muttering their excuse-mes, they squeezed their way past their seated neighbours to take seats near the front.

Meanwhile, their host, a slim and rather elegant looking lady, who introduced herself as a Missus Rosalie Muller, waited patiently for them to take their places.

"Thank you, distinguished friends, ladies and gentlemen. Well, we have quite a busy schedule today, so with your permission I'll briefly outline events and introduce you to our first speaker. We'll break for tea and biscuits at eleven and then our second speaker will address you. Again, we'll break for a spot of lunch at one o'clock, a delightful spread laid on by Missus Morgan and her staff. In the afternoon, we'll have the final two lectures, culminating in a key note address by our Director of Studies, Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen."

Tenzing had been away in his homeland, Narayana, and this would be the first time that Helen and he had set eyes on the Director or heard him speak, though a couple of his books had featured in their preparatory reading list.

"As I say, it's a busy schedule, and there'll be an opportunity for a few quick questions at the end of each speech, so without further ado I'd like to press on."

"Distinguished friends, ladies and gentlemen, our first speaker of the day has written a great many critically-acclaimed works of fiction, most notably *The Rose and the Thorn*, which won several major awards and has since, of course, been made into a film. With a truly noteworthy career spanning four decades and inspiring generations of readers which include the young, the young at heart and the learned, it is an honour and a privilege to

introduce to you our good friend, Winifred Rawlings.”

Amidst applause, Rosalie Muller paused there for a moment and guided the elderly speaker to the dais, exchanging a friendly greeting, then taking her seat in the audience.

Winifred Rawlings waited patiently for the applause to die down, taking the opportunity to arrange her lecture notes and take a sip of water; then, clearing her throat, she looked up and began to address them.

“Indeed, my officially recognized writing career spans some four decades,” the lady told them. “I guess you could say that’s when the orchard began to bear edible and marketable fruit. But you know, I’ve just entered my seventieth year and the seeds were planted and it all began long, long before that.

“I spent my formative years in a land far away from here, so far away that folk still refer to it as ‘Yonder’, meaning the land beyond Dravine, a land which in itself is largely an unexplored mystery to most, even in these allegedly enlightened times.”

Helen exchanged glances with Randal. She smiled and raised her eyebrows to indicate her interest.

“I would say that at the time I grew up, fewer than one in ten of the population of Kronstein – the land ‘Yonder’ – were able to read and write. And yet, you know, there was a time, long, long ago, when Kronstein was the seat of learning in this world. Well, there were two, really: Kronstein and Erigwid; farther still to the south, but that’s a story for another day. This at a time when we, in what is now known as the Freelands, still housed ourselves in caves and mud huts, dressed ourselves in animal skins and were humble hunter gatherers.

“And yet despite these inordinately high levels of illiteracy, and despite the great poverty, the folk of Kronstein had a rich tradition of oral storytelling, spanning back not through decades but through centuries. Over one millennium in fact. Great store was placed on the ability to memorize this wonderful treasury of tales and great store was placed in the concomitant skill of public oratory; a skill passed down through the generations from father to son and from mother to daughter. Of course over time the stories are often embellished and take on something of the character, concerns and preoccupations of the storytellers.

“Nowadays publishers are forever clamouring for the latest

innovation, and yet the folk of Kronstein would have shaken their heads at this demand for what we might term 'the flavour of the month.' You see, these traditional tales are like onions, with layer upon layer of deep meaning, which gradually become apparent in the course of hearing these stories countless times, until the hearer makes them a part of himself or herself.

“Perhaps you've noticed how young children will ask to be read the same bedtime story over and over again? They actually value this repetition and benefit enormously from the consequent and deep familiarity, something which is for the most part lost to us as adults.

“The garden is still there, believe it or not, but alas it has become so thoroughly overgrown with strangling weeds, and we have become so forgetful over the years, and so intent on making busy-busy progress in our busy-busy, oh-so-important lives, that for most intents and purposes it is not. The garden is not evident, that is. And yet, having said that, in a way you might counter that by saying that it is, in fact, *self-evident*, did we but have ears to hear, eyes to see and taste buds that had not become so jaded over the years.

“So, I was fortunate to grow up in a family which not only prized these dying oral traditions, but also valued written works. They surrounded my sister and me with such works, and father was forever bringing books back with him when he returned from his many travels – books on all manner of subjects imaginable. Some were works of creative fiction for our enjoyment; others works of fact for our edification – though of course there was also, for me at least, enjoyment to be found in learned works and edification to be found in fiction.

“You could say that I was steeped in these tales, and their rich nutrition gradually soaked in.

“And, of course, as an aside, many of the so-called 'hard facts' of today turn out tomorrow to have been nothing more than the often misguided opinions of yesterday. As for 'belief', well, to me this is a poor substitute for real knowledge and understanding. But that's another subject for another day, something close to our Director Tenzing's heart.”

She laughed. “And please don't get me started about that other bane of alleged civilization: lives in the thrall of over-

emotion. I am, as I'm sure you're aware, given recent press coverage, not myself entirely immune. Anyhow, these are subjects for another day.

“So, as I say, the seeds which eventually blossomed and came to fruition, through hard work and tender loving care over the years; these seeds were planted long, long ago, before even my time, in a far-flung and little understood land.

“Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that my garden flourished not *because* of my subsequent formal education, but *in spite of it*. Perhaps you think that's a hard and ungrateful thing for me to say. Well, I'm sorry, but I was brought up to value truth and to truthfully speak my mind. Of course, I fully understand that this is not to everybody's taste, and agree that this world would be a poor and threadbare place if we all thought and behaved alike.”

Winifred Rawlings paused to take a sip of water as a short wave of applause punctuated the speech.

“I could go on in this vein all day, of course, (vein with an 'e') but you wouldn't thank me for it. Well, perhaps some might, but those thanks would be misplaced. And it would be vain of me, vain with an 'a'.

“So I think what I'll do instead is to retrace my steps and return us to the source and try to give you a taste of the kind of traditional stories which inspired me as a youngster and eventually helped lead me to success as a writer; and, later on – when I discovered the works of Tenzing – culminated in an interest in and appreciation of the mystical life.

“And, who knows where this may lead in your own lives? It's never too late to come to appreciate this ancient and wise treasury of materials and, hopefully, to derive benefit from its wonderful bounty. It's surely no happy coincidence that the never-emptying or bottomless purse is a device much beloved in our traditional fairytales. Purse, I might add, being a code word in our tradition for the Heart.

“The final thing that I'd like to mention before we move on and before I forget, is that when I write, I don't plan it out as do many who write to patent formulae. Though I've tried, that approach just doesn't seem to work for me. Very often, indeed most often, I'm not at all sure where the words come from; or for that matter, even a good share of the subsequent copy editing.

Certainly not from the conscious mind. The words just seem to appear in my mind and write themselves of their own accord.

“The writer never seems to sleep. I've lost count of the ideas and storylines that have come to me in the middle of the night, ideas that I always think I'll remember when I wake up in the morning and, over and over again, have been singularly unable to recall. I take a pen and paper to bed, and go to bed determined to stir myself and write the ideas down, but once asleep that resolve seems to evaporate, and I wake up frustrated by my weakness and incompetence.

“You could say, in a way, that I'm not actually a writer, though perhaps I might be called a recorder? And when I come to edit the work afterwards, it's not so much the writing which I correct as the faults in this recording. Or perhaps I'm merely an actor reciting her lines? Some have asked whether I'm a medium, but that's not a term I care to use: it has so many unfitting and bizarre metaphysical connotations. So I call myself a recorder or a scribe. I just happen to be one of those holding the pen, that's all.”



Finally came the time that the regulars in the audience had been waiting all day for. Rosalie Muller clapped her hands together to attract the attention of some of the younger students who were still chattering away with their backs to her toward the rear of the hall.

“Distinguished friends, ladies and gentlemen, if I might have your attention ... Yes, please do come down and take your seats”

“Friends, I'm sure that our final speaker of the day requires no introduction from me and, since we are in danger of running over time and some of our visitors have tight travel schedules to meet, without further ado, I give you *Foxholes'* Director of Studies: Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen.”

A tall, slim gentleman in a dark suit and bright orange tie walked smartly across the floor, greeted by a warm round of applause, and stood at the dais. Arranging his notes before him, he raised his hand both in greeting and also to gently round off the applause, and the audience fell into rapt silence.

“First and foremost, and on behalf of each of us gathered

here today, I am sure, let me take a moment to thank our esteemed colleagues – Winifred Rawlings; Professor Hadrian Crump and Doctor Vanessa Moonie – for taking the time to prepare and deliver such engaging lectures today. Friends, your efforts are greatly appreciated. And many thanks, also to Missus Morgan and her staff for laying on such a wonderful spread.”

Tenzing had a slightly oriental look about him, but when he spoke, you'd have taken him for a refined and well-educated native Freelanders.

“When Hadrian rounded off his speech with that immortal punchline in no need of a joke: *'And then the doctor says, "If this is my thermometer, where's my pen?"'*” let me tell you, friends, the first thought that occurred to me when it finally dawned on me, was *'How on earth do I follow that?'*

“Like Winifred, I've been at this lark from a very early age. Like her, though we grew up in rather different cultures, her in Kronstein and me in Narayana, I was steeped in the Tradition and over the course of many years a subtle something gradually seeped in, in spite of the sometimes contradictory impulses I had at that time.

“Looking back, though I was too far up my own backside to really know it at the time, the first twenty years of my formal involvement in the way – and by that I mean studies *in* the way, not studies *of* the way – the first twenty years I was very much the rookie, learning the trade. So I was something of a late developer, really.

“‘Why on earth would the man admit to a thing like that?’ I hear one or two of you ask. How unbecoming. Well, I'll be candid with you: I wish to dispel any misconceptions you might have, one being that one has to be perfect to successfully make progress on this Path. I don't want you to end up walking away from us feeling that rising to the ranks of the Elect is an impossibility. I wish to remain approachable, not to be seen as some impossible, distant object of veneration. Heaven forbid. I want you to realize that *'Hell, if he can do it, then so can I.'*

“You know, speaking of respectability and of appearances, many years ago – and I'm talking about the time before the invention of the television – my father, who was a Master of the Way, was heavily criticized by some of his more religious-minded

associates for frequenting the local cinema

“And, by the way, try to bear this in mind when you watch the second film we’re showing this evening, directed by our good friend, Victor Jung.

“Anyhow, when a suitable opportunity arose, he invited these critics to go with him to the cinema.

“And when they emerged they were all stunned. One of them, the group’s spokesman, shook his head in disbelief saying: ‘I went to the cinema thinking that I was just going to watch an ordinary film, and yet I was astounded, for it appeared to me that I was observing the conversations of Saints.’

There was something about Tenzing’s words that provoked a sudden and profound, though fleeting, recognition in Randal – something that he felt and in an instant knew, rather than conjured up in thought – and he sat up to pay more particular attention.

“You may not credit it, friends, but we are actually steeped in this reality, and yet almost totally oblivious to it, to such an extreme degree that we feel perfectly at ease denying the possibility of such a reality.

“Let me tell you, friends,” Tenzing announced, and at this point Randal felt that Tenzing was looking directly at him: “*The shadow of scepticism is dispelled in the light of real knowledge.*”

As Tenzing spoke those words, Randal could feel his jaw drop; or at least that’s how he felt inside, and he could feel his scalp bristling in a moment of deep contact. If what he’d experienced earlier was the aroma, then this was surely the taste.

He who tastes, knows, came a wise and quiet voice inside his head.

“Randal, are you all right?” whispered a voice beside him. He’d inadvertently squeezed on Helen’s hand a little too tightly, momentarily lost in reverie.

“Sure, sorry about that.”

“Shhh!” came the insistent hiss from a woman in the row in front.

“Utterly dispelled,” Tenzing emphasized, nodding in his direction and smiling broadly.

Like the man in the cinema, Randal was still feeling a little dazed when they finally emerged from the library and made their way back toward the main building.

As they sat there in the cafeteria, Randal saw Tenzing pass by, heading off down the corridor toward the offices, and he felt a great and sudden urge to go after him, and made his excuses, saying that he had to visit the loo.

Tenzing was in company, however. Rosalie Muller was with him, so he followed at a discreet distance. The pair of them stopped for a moment, just outside the common room and Randal was faced with a dilemma: whether to carry on walking or approach him.

"Hello there," the man smiled. "Is there something we can do for you?"

"I, er, um ..." Randal began to stutter.

"Why don't you come and sit in my study for a while?" Tenzing proposed. "I'll catch up with you in a few minutes, Rosalie."

Tenzing beckoned him down a short corridor beside Matron's office and into his room, which was stacked from floor to ceiling in books. He offered Randal a seat on the settee and went to sit beside him. "You were saying ..."

"I'm sorry, you're going to find this strange, but when you said '*The shadow of scepticism is dispelled in the light of real knowledge*', it felt like you were directing those words to me. I arrived here a few days ago and when Mister Grainger was driving me here, that precise phrase entered my head, and I wasn't sure whether I'd said it or Mister Grainger. And it occurred to me then that this might be the true origin of the phrase 'without the shadow of a doubt.'"

Tenzing nodded. "Thank you for sharing that with me ..."

"Randal. Randal Smith."

"Thank you, Randal. And, no, I don't find it at all strange. Or rather I would if this kind of thing didn't happen so often. Yes, that could well be the origin of the phrase."

"What seems more significant, to me at least," continued Randal, "is that it was as though like the man in the cinema, I was sceptical, and that your saying that phrase and looking in my direction was almost like that demonstration. Like the man in the cinema I was still quite stunned by the event."

"And yet?"

"Was there an 'and yet'?" Randal wondered aloud. "Well, yes,

lots of them: and yet the woman who sat in front of me and told me to 'shush' and even Helen who sat beside me, both of them were oblivious to that demonstration. And yet to me, it felt like we'd made some kind of deep contact. If you'll forgive me saying so, sir, being here in this room with you is both calming and yet – at some other level – almost unbearably intense.”

Tenzing nodded. “Indeed.” Then: “We each get out of these events what is in it for us. Others will derive what is in it for them. Some are so sensitive that they cannot bear to be in the same room as the friends and have to be taught at a distance. And, of course, there will be some in every gathering who have it waved in their face and just don't get it at all.”

He looked at his pocket watch. “Forgive me, Randal, but I have an urgent matter to attend to before Rosalie Muller goes home. I'm grateful that you found the courage to come and seek me out. The event was indeed significant. Please rest assured that we'll speak again.”

And with that, Tenzing politely and gently showed him the door and he wondered off back to the cafeteria to rejoin Helena, Dave and Logan before he was missed and questions were asked.

18. Worrying developments

They briefly caught sight of Dave the next day, but he was just a distant blob scurrying from the car park at the rear of the main building toward the annex. Since they had just embarked upon the induction course and had a whole heap of things to occupy their time and their minds, it was just as well that they'd been attending the meditation classes and practising their breathing exercises. As a consequence, it wasn't until Monday evening that they finally got a chance to speak with Dave. He had been sitting in the cafeteria for some time, engaged in earnest conversation with Tenzing and Rosalie Muller, and Helen thought it only right and proper to wait until he was alone.

Finally, the meeting adjourned, Helen managed to catch Dave's attention and, bringing a fresh coffee with him, he came across to their table to join them.

"Pull up a chair, Dave," Randal greeted him.

"Let's take our drinks and have a stroll in the grounds," he suggested. "I've been sitting down for too long and, as you know, I have itchy feet."

"Itchy feet?" Helen asked quizzically.

"He means that his feet were itching to be off," Randal explained, as they rose from their chairs and headed for the door, hurrying to catch up with Dave. They headed off down the corridor, then out through the emergency exit which led out into the grounds around the side of the building.

"So, does the program work?" asked Randal as the lad slackened his pace to allow them to catch up.

"It sure does, partner," Dave nodded.

"And?" he prompted.

"And I made a copy of the disks for Craig. He was as pleased as punch and sends you his regards."

"That's good to hear and thanks for your efforts, Dave."

"You're welcome, and thank *you*."

For some reason, Dave seemed uncharacteristically unforthcoming that evening.

"Any news from the front?" Randal asked him.

“Front?”

“The front line. If you don't mind me saying so, Dave, you seem unusually reticent this evening. Is something wrong?”

“Sorry, a lot's been happening and I've got a whole heap of things on my mind.”

“A problem shared is a problem halved, so they say.”

“I'd far sooner share solutions,” Dave countered, “though, alas, at this moment in time I have none. They also say 'it's an ill wind that blows no good'. What that means is that when things go wrong, there can also be positive results. But in this particular case, and without wishing to sound melodramatic, the fates appear to have made an exception.”

Dave drew a deep breath. “Okay, I'll tell you what I know. Yes, as I had hoped, Comms Net is still up-and-running west of the border. It's still very much an experimental university project and fortunately has thus far attracted no publicity, though of course, word has been spreading through the student grapevine. I'm hoping that the Ministry of Information has not got wind of its existence, though it would be foolish of us to assume that this is the case. Rather than shut the thing down, they could, of course, have simply chosen to allow it to continue, whilst secretly monitoring traffic.”

“So Craig's hooked up Comms Net via a proxy?” Randal queried, glancing across to check Helen's reaction as he spoke, looking for signs of boredom or irritation.

“Yes, but in order to maintain as low a profile as possible, we agreed that rather than push his luck, he should share the load and keep switching between a number of different proxies. At the last count, your program had managed to locate twenty one that appeared to be stable and three or four that seem to come and go.”

“I talked this through with Craig and one thing he'd intent on working on is some means by which encrypted messages might be passed from computer to computer directly rather than using Comms Net as an intermediary. They'd need to install software at the other end, of course, and getting that software to them would present us with challenges. Again, however, Craig's got one of his chaps looking into the possibility of briefly uploading files to the Comms Net server in Gothgoria, so that users their side of the border could subsequently download those files. That would still

leave the question of how to distribute passwords, but I'm sure the boffins at the university will be able to figure that one out. Failing that, we might have to send someone back across the border to deliver the gubbins¹³ by hand."

Boffins be buggered, thought Randal. He instantly knew how this was going to end up, of course, his interest once pricked and the bit between his teeth, and perhaps that was what Dave was secretly hoping, without coming straight out and saying it? Here was a project in the making. The question was whether the mathematics section in the library was up to the task or whether he'd have to go into the city and hunt up the university book shops.

Dave turned to Helen, a broad smile etched across his face. "Okay, that's the technical shit out of the way, you'll be glad to know, Helen. Let's turn our attention to the political scene and then to matters a little closer to home."

"Oh, hang on a minute, Jobsworth is heading our way," Dave warned them, abruptly changing the subject.

"Mister Jones," the caretaker addressed him as he approached. "One o' my cleaners tells me your room is like a ruddy pig sty. Tidy it up, would you, or I'll 'ave no option but to report the matter to Matron. And while I'm about it, if you must smoke in the office, kindly use a blessed ash tray and not the coffee mugs and the floor. Filthy habit, if you ask me."

"Right oh," Dave nodded as the man stalked off toward the annex.

"Where was I when I was so rudely interrupted? Oh, yes: the political situation. You remember the guy with the handle 'New Republic'?"

Randal nodded.

"Well, scanning through the messages on Comms Net, he's been warning for some time that the Collectivists would be next on the P.W.F.P's list. He posted a message four days ago saying that their offices had been trashed and their leader, Frampton, and a few other officials had been arrested. And since that time, though they were forever bombarding the bulletin boards with their propaganda, there's been no word from any of them.

"There were also a couple of messages from Myra in

13 Various unnamed items.

Dravine. There are only a couple of users that far afield. She said that there'd been news reports about clashes along the border with Gothgoria. The Dravinians had expelled three members of a Gothgorian trade mission for alleged spying. Harsh words had been exchanged and tensions raised.

“She posted a second message on Sunday saying there'd been ominous reports of a troop build-up on the Gothgorian side of the border, and was wondering whether she should grab her kids, fill her car and drive to relatives in the hills.

“Dravine was once a part of a greater Gothgoria you see, but following a lengthy and bloody civil war it had gained independence. Many Gothgorians, Lucian included, feel that Dravine rightly belongs to them and the restoration of the greater Gothgoria is very much on the party's agenda. So we can't rule out the possibility of an invasion and perhaps a coup by their Dravinian sympathizers.

“I brought the matter to Tenzing's attention, of course, and he said that he'd pass it on to one of his contacts in the government. Tenzing thinks it unlikely that the Freelanders would act on the information, however. They have little interest in this far-flung place and had made no move to intervene at the time of the civil war.

“Call me a cynic if you like, but if the region was rich in oil or other minerals, then their outlook might be different.”

“Have you heard from Henry or Lucinda, Dave?” Helen enquired.

“Henry's not very *au fait* with computers and leaves that to Lucinda. 'HailLucian101' seems to have gone quiet recently but there's a newbie by the name of 'Hal' which could be another of her aliases.”

“H and L again,” Helen noted, quick as a flash.

“Could well be,” Dave smiled. “My, you're as bright as a button, Helen. I'll have to have a closer look at Hal's messages to see if I can detect any of Lucinda's idiosyncrasies or other clues, and maybe drop the odd clue of my own: I've had to change my user name and of course, much as I'd like to, I can't just come out and say 'Hi Lu', it's your old mate, Jonesy.”

“Don't you have any pre-arranged codes?”

“We did for use in emergencies, but they change every day

and I thought it best to burn my code book before I came away. And for the life of me, I can't think of any details I could hint at: things that only they and I are privy to. Anyway, I'll have a word with Tenzing, see what he has to say."

Helen raised her finger and it looked like a light had suddenly switched on inside her head. "Do you remember what Henry said to us: "'First eat, then talk": that's my motto.' She shrugged her shoulders. "Well? It's just a thought, that's all."

Dave grinned and nodded his head appreciatively. "I'll have some of whatever it is you're on, if any goes begging."

"If it's his motto, then it's likely that Lucinda will recognize it."

"That's true, Helen, but it's a phrase he could have repeated to any number of other folk. Not to worry, we'll come up with something."



The following Monday, they sat in the cafeteria eating their breakfast and prepared for the second week of their induction course, amidst a hubbub of heated conversation. The morning papers had just arrived and beneath the headlines and the lead stories – which detailed revelations of the scandalous misappropriation of expenses by Members of Parliament and an outbreak of plague in a makeshift refugee camp to the south – were two short paragraphs, continued on the back page beneath the sport.

This brief article stated that Gothgorian troops had reportedly entered Dravine to lend support to an attempted coup by nationalist factions. Their stated aim was to depose the hitherto populist government on the grounds of incompetence and corruption, and to return order to the streets following bouts of rioting bordering on anarchy. Like Gothgoria, the economic crisis had bitten deeply in Dravine.

A spokesman for the government said that the matter was of some concern, but would not elaborate, nor condemn the move, when pressed further.

Passions were running high that day, and some of the Dravinian students were hotly debating the possibility of returning to defend their motherland, but fortunately Rosalie Muller intervened and good sense prevailed.

Helen had opted for an evening pottery class while Randal, thinking that he was perhaps better with his brain than with his hands, had opted for the writing course. And when they met up not long before bed that day, Helen came skipping along like a spring lamb.

“Da-dah!” she announced, rummaging in her bag and thrusting something under his nose before they'd even exchanged greetings and kissed.

“Matching mugs,” she proudly announced, handing one to him. It was bold and red with a large, bright yellow “R” painted on it, under the shiny glaze.

“For me?”

Helen nodded eagerly and showed him her own mug, which was altogether more dainty, less voluminous and painted with bright green grass and delicate flowers.

“Oh, wow, that is absolutely wonderful. Thank you so much. That's really thoughtful of you.

“I'm so sorry that I have nothing to give you in return,” he apologized. Then, seeing Helen raise her eyebrows: “Here, let me give you a big hug.”

He was tickled pink by this simple and kind gesture and proud of Helen. “Thank you, that's really made my day. I'll treasure this keepsake and every time I have a drink from it, I'll think fondly of you.”

19. Bugger the boffins

“Hi, dude,” lilted Randal, passing by Dave on the way to the counter of the cafeteria. He tossed three disks down on the table.

“What's that?” Dave asked him, checking the labels on the disks and still none the wiser. “What's *E.P.M.S.*?”

Randal bent his head and explained in hushed tones: “Encrypted personal messaging system.”

“You're kidding, right? I wondered where you'd been on an evening.”

“Tell me about it. I was up half the night completing the project. Needless to say, Helen was not amused, so I have some making up to do today. Okay, disk one is for folk over here running Quantum. I haven't a machine to test it on, so you'll have to get your friend Craig to double check, but disk two should work on steam engines across the border. I've checked the thing out between the computer in the office and the one in the library and it seems to be working okay.”

“That's great, but miracles have details: how do we get the software over the border in the first place?”

“Well, if Craig's buddies can set up a file download, all they have to do is run it from the command line. The first time the program runs, it goes through a configuration procedure which, amongst other things, generates a unique public and private encryption key pair. The first time they send a message and you reply, there's an exchange of public keys. The private key has to be kept safe and secure; the public key can be passed around quite freely amongst friends.”

“I still don't quite get it, though. How can we send a message to Lucinda, say, if we don't have her numerical network address?”

“Given the address of Craig's server at the university, what he needs to do is allow folk to dial into Comms Net and set up personal, password-protected mail boxes. It goes without saying that the mail server needs to be this side of the border. This will mean quite a lot of work, but the boffins at the university should be able to figure something out. If nothing else, I'll have pointed them in the right direction.”

Helen was hovering at the canteen counter. "Be with you in a second," he mouthed to her.

And so will the Harvest Holidays, came the reply.

"Listen, I'd best be off. It's not easy juggling technical projects, induction courses and blossoming romance; even with the aid of breathing exercises. Anyhow, you'll find instructions, a full technical explanation of the software and also a draft proposal for the mail server in text files on disk three, which is not for public consumption."

"Wow, that's great, Randal, thanks. I'll get a copy to Craig and give the thing a whirl later this morning."

"Okay, Helen," Randal beamed as he joined her at the counter. "I'm done with the project and I can give you the attention and consideration that you deserve. Let's grab something to eat, then we'll head for seminar."

Helen seemed pleased enough with that. Though she had her moments, she was also very patient, and if she did go into a mood, it didn't last long.

He had a good heart to heart with Helen that evening. "Sometimes I feel like I'm letting you down," he happened to remark, feeling that he ought to be more open and transparent with her.

Helen smiled and gently stroked his arm. "You don't have to prove yourself to me, you know, Randal: at least not in the way you seem to think you can prove yourself."

"I'm not looking for a brain surgeon or a captain of industry or any other outward show," she continued. "I just want somebody to love."

He drew his breath in sharply. Any number of people could fit that bill and would jump at the chance. Helen had a great many admirers.

"And that someone is *you*, Randal Smith," she added thoughtfully, giving him a friendly peck on the cheek. "Now quit your worrying and give me a nice, warm cuddle."

20. Fame for fifteen minutes

“Well, you've certainly started something,” Dave piped up when they bumped into him a couple of weeks later. True to his word, Randal had stayed clear of computers and devoted his time to Helen and to the induction course.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, Craig and his mates have got a mail server up-and-running. They made a few copies of your software to pass around the staff and researchers, so that they could carry out a field trial.”

“What they didn't count on was the level of interest there'd be, once the students got wind of the thing. They've got pirated copies of the disks emerging from every orifice and so many folk logging in and signing up, they've had to wheel in three more servers and a load balancer to cope with demand.

“Your name is on everybody's lips. They say you walk on water,” Dave laughed.

Randal grimaced. He'd spent most of his life hiding his light under a bushel – not that his little light was much to behold. Why? Out of embarrassment, really. Out of the fear of appearing awkward. The fear of his mind going blank in the middle of an interview. The fear that he would be unable to live up to his reputation and would come across as a sad anorak in the glaring light of public scrutiny.

“There've been a few minor hiccups, but of course that's all grist for the mill.”

“Any idea when they go live in Gothgoria?”

“File downloads can roll as soon as Craig's happy with the mail server. I've got a message ready to cross post to the Comms Net bulletin boards and newsgroups as soon as they give me the go-ahead, which could be any time now. All I have to do is log in, copy and paste the text and hit [Enter] and we're cooking.”



There were a lot of gunshots in the grounds that morning which caused alarm at first, but they were reliably informed that it was merely Mister Longbottom, the groundsman, going about his work. There'd been something of an explosion in the local rabbit

population that season and the critters were making a mess of the vegetable garden and nearby lawns. Matters were further exacerbated by an ever growing colony of wood pigeons who'd decided to settle at *Foxholes*, their major crime being the masses of poop splattered around the perimeter of the main building and inner quadrangle as they lay in wait on the ledges above, and occasionally further afield whenever these squadrons of sky vermin, as Seth Longbottom called them, decided to open their sluice gates and shed their load mid-flight. So, with the aid of his faithful dog, Gadger, Seth had embarked on a one man crusade to rid *Foxholes* of this dual plague. No doubt rabbit stew and pigeon pie would be on the menu as "chef's choice" in the cafeteria that week.

Later that day they saw Seth Longbottom by the lily pond, a double barrelled shotgun cracked open under his arm. He'd just button-holed Rosalie Muller and they were engaged in urgent conversation. At the time they thought little of it, but later that day, Dave drew them aside in the corridor and had a quiet word.

"Seth Longbottom potted more than he'd bargained for this afternoon," Dave told them. "It seems we have a spy in our midst."

He surely couldn't mean that the groundsman had shot a spy.

"He shot a pigeon as it was flying over and sent Gadger to retrieve it. When Seth went to put the kill in his bag, he happened to notice that there was something attached to one of its legs: a tiny metal cylinder. Anyhow, he unfastened it and unscrewed the top. Turns out there was a little piece of paper inside, tightly rolled up. Fishing it out, he discovered that there was some kind of message written on the paper, though he couldn't read it, since it was just a string of numbers. The writing was tiny and must have been written under a magnifying glass. Most likely a code. Tenzing had me take a look at it, but I haven't the foggiest what it means."

"Maybe the bird was en-route from elsewhere and has nothing to do with *Foxholes*," said Randal, thinking aloud.

"Actually, Seth's pretty sure the thing came from the bell tower." The bell tower was out of bounds to students, not least because the narrow, winding wooden steps leading up had been deemed unsafe.

“Anyhow, just thought you should know. Keep it under your hats for now.”

“Under our hats?” queried Helen, looking perplexed. They'd already learnt so many local turns of phrase since they'd come to the Freelands, but clearly there must be many, many more that they hadn't as yet come across.

“I mean keep this news to yourselves. Don't spread it around. And – without wishing to alarm you unduly – we're going to have to be doubly vigilant in future. I think it best if we keep the office door locked when we're not around. I'll see if Jobsworth can sort me out a couple of spare keys, if it's not too much trouble. Time I moved out of here and got a place of my own again.” Dave was very much used to being his own boss and pleasing himself when he got up, what he worked on, when he ate and when he went to bed, answerable only to his own conscience.

“Oh, Louis is not such a bad old stick once you get to know him,” Helen chipped in.

“Louis now, is it? Yes, I gather he has an eye for the ladies,” said Dave.

“Take my advice,” she continued unabashed. “Buy Louis half a bottle of whiskey or buy his wife a box of chocolates, thank him for all his help, and he'll be as good as gold. Mark my words. All that man needs is a little respect and tender loving care.”

Dave screwed up his face in disgust when Helen's back was turned and, with a hasty “catch you later”, he was off.

21. Unwanted attentions

Helen had gone into town early that Saturday morning with Harold Grainger's wife, Millicent. Since the outing to Ulsgrave, the day before the seminar in the library, they'd become firm friends. Helen was a little on the shy and retiring side, at least amongst strangers, and it was good to see her gaining more independence and developing her own interests.

Helen was branching out all over the place now. Having struck up a friendship with the writer Winifred Rawlings, she'd been invited along to the meetings of the Cultural Research Fellowship and even delivered a spell binding talk there one night, about her ancestral home Kronstein, the ex-patriot community in Gothgoria, and of course, the sanctions imposed by the nationalist regime. There was even talk of Helen joining the fellowship's committee, to fill a recent vacancy. All this worked wonders for Helen, and Randal was over the moon to see her thriving.

Randal ventured into town later that morning, cadging a lift in Dave's borrowed car, hoping to find a shop somewhere that would build him a new PC. Since he'd started going out with Helen, he'd cut back somewhat on his use of the computer, but if he was to find a livelihood in Sher Point, then it would be a shame to let his experience go to waste and end up in some dead end job that he grew to detest. And it was awkward having to share the computer in the library with a hundred other students and the machine in the office with Dave.

At last he'd found a place that had actually had a box already made up which was well within his budget, having been granted an interest-free loan by *Foxholes'* career development committee. It was a pretty bog standard model, minus many of the bells and whistles, but it was a start and he could always add to it as and when necessary.

Paying in cash, he asked them to hold onto the machine and he'd arrange for a friend to pick it up later that day, and went off to find Dave. He'd left the lad propping up the bar in a nearby hostelry. Dave had been pretty much "on the wagon" since they'd

left Gothgoria and he was actually still sober when they met up again. They had a quiet drink together, then Randal begged his leave and headed off down town, as arranged, to meet Helen and Millicent Grainger by the old clock tower in Market Place.

Randal didn't get that far. As he was cutting across town down a narrow side street, which Dave had reliably informed him was a short cut, a long black car pulled up ahead of him. Thinking nothing of it, as two burly men stepped out, he walked on by.

Just as he was passing them, he felt a sharp jab in his backside and almost instantly his system was flooded with adrenaline and he felt suddenly hot and dizzy. The last thing he remembered was his legs giving way and slumping to the ground.

When he finally woke up, it was to find himself in a dark and confined space, bound hand and foot and gagged, and feeling terribly claustrophobic. For a moment, he was unsure of where he was, and then he realized by the occasional bumps that he must be tied up in the trunk of a car. Only then did he begin to connect the dots and come to realize what must have happened.

For reasons which he couldn't as yet fathom, he'd been kidnapped. Quite where he was being taken, of course he had no way of knowing. But he did know that they drove for hours, so it was certainly far away.

22. The torture

When Randal finally began to come round, having been given a second shot of some sedative before being bundled out of the car, it was to find himself in a darkened room. There was a damp and mouldy smell in the air and he was trembling with the cold which penetrated his skin and gnawed at his bones, especially through the soles of his bare feet which pressed against rough stone.

Seated on a hard wooden chair, and naked with the exception of his briefs, he attempted to get to his feet but could not. Both his arms and legs were securely fastened by tight iron fetters bolted onto the chair. And though he pushed himself back and forth as vigorously as he was able in his weakened condition, the chair itself refused to budge, perhaps being bolted to the stone floor.

He could hear a heavy footfall now and the jingle of keys. There was the loud squeak of dry and rusty hinges and a shaft of light which swept across the room as the door was cast open. A dark and menacing shadow stood in the doorway for a moment before the door slammed-to behind it, plunging him once more into the darkness.

The shadowy figure approached, each slow step echoing round the cell. Judging by the sharpness of the echoes, it was a bare stone cell. Suddenly there was a splash and Randal was drenched in icy-cold water, nithering him to the bone. The shock woke him in an instant.

“What do you want with me?” he demanded hoarsely, but there was no reply. The figure simply walked away, opened the door and slammed it to. And again there came the jingle of the keys as the door was locked.

This went on for hours. What time it was, or even what day, Randal had no idea. Every few minutes until he lost count, the figure entered the room without speaking a word, and drenched him from head to foot, presumably with water from a bucket, then turned and left.

Randal was grimly determined not to be beaten, however, and he really could see the value of the meditation classes and the

breathing exercises, for now he really had to dig deep into his inner reserves.

What purpose this served, he did not know. He was getting tired now and perhaps it was meant to intensify his discomfort and prevent him from getting any sleep; to perhaps soften him up for whatever they – whoever “they” were – had planned for him?

Despite his acute and also deeply embarrassing discomfort, Randal must finally have drifted off to sleep. He didn't hear the men come in, but he did awake with a start, blinking in the sudden light, when they started to remove the fetters and manhandled him to a standing position. Once again, weaker than ever, his legs collapsed beneath him, but two burly guards grasped hold of him under his armpits and they half-pulled, half-dragged him from the cell and off down a long stone corridor. They came to another room and, turning sharp left, they entered and pushed him inside. There was a wooden chair ahead of him and he instinctively reached out and steadied himself.

He cast his eyes around the room which was almost as bare as the cell he'd been in. In the centre stood a sturdy oak table. To his left stood a rather rotund and rosy-cheeked woman. And ahead of him, beyond the table, a tall, slim, green shirted figure, a man, spun on his heel to face Randal.

“Ah, Mister Smith. How good of you to join us.” He motioned toward the chair. “Please take a seat.” Then, to his burly escort: “Thank you, that will be all for now.”

“What do you want with me,” Randal croaked. Despite the frequent drenching, he hadn't had anything to drink or to eat for so longer, perhaps for days, and his throat was parched.

The man took up a jug and poured a little water, perhaps an inch, into a tin cup before him and slid the cup toward Randal. He took the cup and, just pausing briefly to rinse the water around his mouth, he downed it in one.

“I would have thought you'd have had bigger fish to fry.”

“My dear Randal – may I call you by your familiar name? – you hide your light under a bushel. Your reputation precedes you, old chap. A little dickie bird tells me that in certain technical circles, you are looked upon as some kind of guru. Nay, even an object of veneration.”

Randal sighed a deep sigh. Something had been nibbling at

him when he'd added his name to the credits in the program's help file, telling him that this might not be such a good idea.

"A little dickie bird, you say? And would that dickie bird have been a homing pigeon, by any chance?" No sooner had these words left his lips, than he was regretting the utterance and cursing his idiocy. He'd let slip that they knew about the spy.

"Ah," said the man, looking up sharply. "I hadn't appreciated that you knew of this matter. I can see that we're going to have to be more careful in future. I'm a patient man. Perhaps a little later in the week you might elaborate on that. But for now there are other more pressing things I'd like to know."

"Try as you might, I'm telling you nothing," Randal retorted.

"As I said, we have all the time in the world and I'm a patient and thorough man, Randal. Sooner or later, you'll come around to our way of thinking and you'll desperately want to talk and to unburden yourself. You'll be begging me to get it over and done with."

"Forgive me, we haven't been properly introduced. You may call me Ulrich."

"I gather you're a Gothgorian national," the man began. He pulled up a chair and sat facing Randal. He went on for some time, running through Randal's history and occasionally asking questions. It didn't seem to matter to the man what the subject matter was, so much as him trying to engage Randal in conversation. What was it soldiers did under these trying circumstances: they repeated nothing more than their name, rank and serial number. It wasn't easy maintaining a stone wall, though: many of the things the man spoke of were patent nonsense and he had to fight the urge to correct him.

As the hours passed, without a break – not even a comfort break – he could see the first cracks appearing in the mental wall he'd set between him and the man.

At length the man had to answer the call of nature himself and there was a brief respite. The rotund, red-faced woman still stood there, not moving from the spot and not saying a word.

"I think it's time," the man spoke again on his return, addressing his assistant.

"Certainly, Doctor. Would you like the pliers or the drill?"

The man thought for a moment and stroked his stubbly chin.

“I'm in two minds. Perhaps the drill? No, let's start with the pliers.”

The woman went to a corner of the room, behind Randal, and returned with the tool. With a smart click of her heels, she handed it to the man.

“I think at this point you might ask Richards and Meyers to join us.”

“Certainly, Doctor.”

The two burly guards re-entered the room and, dragging his chair just clear of the table, with his forearms and hands resting on the hard oak surface, they restrained Randal as the man approached.

“Where would you like me to begin?” he asked, snapping the jaws of the pliers open and shut.

This little piggy went to market,

This little piggy stayed at home,

This little piggy had roast beef,

This little piggy had none.

And this little piggy went ...

"Wee, wee, wee", all the way home ...

Finally settling on the index finger of Randal's right hand, he forced the tip of the snipe-nosed pliers between Randal's finger and nail. A fierce wave of pain shot all the way up his arm, causing him to cry out involuntarily, instantly flooding his system with heart-pumping adrenaline.

“Oh, for God's sake, no!” he yelled, as the man gripped the nail tightly in the metal jaws and, pulling it this way and that and heaving with all his might, tore the nail from Randal's hand. No amount of meditation could take away that indescribable pain, however.

“Just cry out if it all gets too much for you, Randal,” the man lilted. “You only have to say 'Stop!' and answer a few simple questions, you know, and I can make this terrible, terrible pain stop.”

“Tell you what ...” The man put the pliers down and returned to his seat. “Why don't we take a few moments out, so that you can collect your thoughts before we continue, eh? What do you say to that, old chap?”

The man fished in his pockets and looked toward his

assistant. She reached into her own pocket and produced a packet of cigarettes. He took two out and gently pushed one across the table in Randal's direction before lighting his own.

Still fighting back the tears, Randal took the cigarette in his good left hand and placed it in his mouth as the man's assistant hovered over him and offered him a light.

"You know, Randal," reflected the man, blowing out a large blue-grey smoke ring. "It strikes me that there are two ways we might go about this: the easy way and the hard way, both of which will get us to the same place in the end. Do you see what I'm saying? In the end, you are going to talk. And in the meantime, should you choose the hard way, there will be inordinate and quite unnecessary suffering."

"I believe someone – one of your beloved guru types – once remarked that though pain is unavoidable, suffering is optional. So, why don't you save yourself all that grief, eh? All you have to do is agree to answer a few simple questions. And nobody outside these four stone walls need be any the wiser. You'd still be a hero in their eyes.

"So, what do you say, old chap?"

Randal said nothing until he'd finished the cigarette, stubbing it out on the oak table before him. "What do I say?" he asked. "I say 'screw you!'"

"Dear, dear, that is such a disappointment, Randal." The man looked at his watch and seemed to be weighing up matters. "Tell you what, I'm feeling in a generous mood today. It's my wife's birthday, bless her heart, and I promised faithfully to take her out to dinner and the cinema this evening. So, what I'm going to do is, I'm going to let you go back to your cell for the night. And you can have a good, long, hard think about this. Then we'll see how you're feeling in the morning, eh? How's that sound?"

Randal made no reply.

"Perhaps you might return Randal's clothes to him, as a sign of our good faith?" the man requested of his assistant.

"Certainly, Doctor."

The man nodded and the guards dragged Randal to his feet, off down the corridor and pushed him violently into the cell. He went sprawling, badly grazing his arm on the hard stone floor, bringing blood. Then the door was slammed-to behind him and he

was again alone in the dark, nursing his wounds.

Some time later, one of the guards brought him a tin cup of water and some food, at least, and tossed his clothes on the floor where he lay. He dressed hastily and wolfed the food down, though with not having eaten for so long, stomach still gurgling, he was left feeling even more hungry when it was all gone.

In spite of the change of clothes, it was too cold and wet and hard to sleep on the floor and the best he could do that night was try to catch what sleep he could sitting in the hard wooden chair.

He woke on countless occasions and each time he did there was a fleeting moment in which he thought perhaps this nightmare was ended, and then that awful, sinking feeling of realizing that it was not. Every time he heard a noise at the door, he was awake, and hoping and praying that the morning and the resumption of the torture would never come.

On one occasion when he awoke, he actually thought that he saw Tenzing standing before him, but the apparition vanished as quickly as it had come and he was left alone and frightened in the dark.

Again when he awoke, he thought he heard Tenzing's voice. And looking up, again he thought he saw him standing there. "Where are you, Randal?" came the voice.

"I wish to God I knew," he cried out, as the shadowy figure vanished from the cell.

At that moment, the door swung open and the two heavyweight guards stood on the threshold, motioning him to follow them. Though he desperately wanted to run, or at least to resist, what was the point? He followed them obediently down the corridor toward that dreaded room.

The man was waiting there for him, sitting across the far side of the oak table. "Ah, good morning to you, Randal. Would you care for some breakfast?"

Randal's mouth began to water at the mere thought.

"Well, one good turn deserves another, as they saying has it. I'm very interested in this new software of yours, E.M.P.S."

"E.P.M.S.," Randal corrected him, without thinking.

"Sorry, you're quite correct. What's that stand for, by the way?"

"It stands for encrypted personal messaging system, as I'm

sure you're perfectly well aware."

"Tell me more. How's the system work?"

Randal didn't answer. Then he remembered what Tenzing had asked him, or at least the thought that had been on his mind, the night before. "You're full of questions, doctor. Maybe you can answer one of mine: where am I?"

"Well, not that it will make the slightest difference if I tell you, you are in Gothgoria."

"Yes, but where precisely?"

"I really don't see the point, but if you really must know, you are at Chatterhume Castle. It's been in Lucian's family for several hundred years, so I'm led to believe."

"And whereabouts is the castle?"

"In the south east of Gothgoria. Some thirty or so miles west of Cardingham, which is just this side of the border between here and the Freelands." The man shook his head. "If you're thinking of escape, you know, you're wasting your time. This place is quite secure."

"Anyhow, you're sidetracking me, Randal, and merely postponing the inevitable. Where was I? Ah yes, as I said: one good turn deserves another. You were about to tell me about the messaging system. What I want to know in general terms is its purpose and more specifically how it works. Don't spare me the technical details, what I don't know I can always write down and consult my colleagues. You don't mind if I jot a few notes down as we talk, do you?"

"I have nothing to say to you on the matter."

The man shook his head sadly. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, Randal. You know, under other circumstances, I'm sure you and I could have become fast friends."

He nodded to his assistant and she went to fetch the pliers.

"Let me make one final appeal to you, Randal. What I said yesterday still stands. You can walk away from here with your honour intact, to be hailed a hero. Nothing more could be expected of you. Yes, you heard me right: I'm offering you your freedom. I'll even drive you as far as the border myself. I have no cause to kill you. And all I ask in return are the answers to a few simple questions. We'll talk about the messaging system this morning and perhaps later this afternoon or tomorrow you might

tell me what you know of The Network?"

"Why don't you go screw yourself?" retorted Randal defiantly.

He let out a blood-curdling scream as the man drove the tip of the pliers under his thumb nail and began to pull. Again, the pain – which was excruciating to the extreme – shot up his arm. He gritted his teeth and ground them together as the nail was finally yanked free, spattering the table with blood.

Grimacing, Randal looked the man in the eye.

"Rot in hell," he spat.

And then he saw a curious thing. Behind the man stood Tenzing, as clear as day. His mouth was moving, though he had to strain to hear the words.

"Come away with me, Randal," Tenzing was saying. "You've taken all you can take in this accursed place and there's nothing more to be done here. Let us turn our backs on this world and walk away."

Randal must have fainted at this point and woke to find himself laying on the thick cushion of grass in a wild flower meadow. Feeling strangely light, as if almost disembodied, he rose to his feet and looked around, shielding his eyes against the sun which beat down strongly. There was just a faint breeze, rustling among the nearby trees, to take the edge off the fierce heat.

Following his feet, which appeared to know the way, he left the sun kissed meadow and entered the green trees, following a narrow dirt path that wound this way and that down the slope ahead of him. Finally he emerged from the trees to stand on a path which ran alongside a bubbling stream.

He remembered having been here before in this secluded glade, sometime long ago in the mists of time.

It came as no great surprise to him to see Tenzing sitting there on a boulder by the side of the stream. Sending a flat stone skimming across the surface of the water, the man turned to beckon him over and he went to sit down beside him.

"You did well," Tenzing smiled, giving Randal a friendly and appreciative pat on the shoulder. "You did all that was asked of you down in the Shadowlands – and much more besides. Mission accomplished."

Tenzing's words were cryptic and yet Randal knew precisely what he meant. It was as if they had never been parted and were resuming a conversation held only moments before.

They spent some time simply sitting there together, then Tenzing arose and they sauntered down the path for some way before heading back up through the trees toward the meadow.

"It's strange," reflected Randal as they walked along the edge of the meadow. "I feel as though I should have a thousand and one questions to ask you, and yet I don't feel the urge. It's as if my just being here is answer enough."

Tenzing nodded. "You'll feel a little strange at first," he agreed. "But you'll settle back in soon enough."

"Tenzing, I'm thinking – somewhere deep down inside – that there's work still to be done."

"Those are echoes, Randal; just distant echoes. There'll be time enough for work later, my friend. For now, what you need to do is simply take time out to relax, enjoy yourself and recharge your batteries."

They left the narrow path and set off up a wide, gravel road. Randal could see a large house in the distance and knew that this was where they were heading. Again, he got the feeling that this was a place he'd clearly known before.

As they approached the house, it loomed larger and larger, nestling in the lee of a hill and overlooking the meadow and the glen. Randal could see now that it was quite a majestic-looking country house and that this was all a part of its broad estate.

They left the scrunching gravel road now, turning in through a pair of ornate wrought iron gates and walking up a long sweeping driveway. At the end of the drive, outside the house, was a wide turning circle that lesser villages might have proudly called their green. A winged grey statue, growing a little green and brown moss, stood in pride of place at its hub.

On they went, up the marble steps, inside the hallway and down a plush corridor. Tenzing paused outside a high, panelled rosewood door and beckoned Randal inside. It was a spacious study, three of its walls lined with heavy book cases whilst the fourth wall in this light and airy room were taken up by two tall windows looking out onto the gardens.

Perhaps this was the source of the delight he took in such

architecture and landscape?

“Welcome home,” Tenzing smiled, offering him a seat near one of the windows so that he could enjoy the view. The man went to a drinks cabinet near his desk, poured out two large tumblers of a bright amber looking liquid and pulled up a chair to sit beside Randal. “Your good health,” he toasted Randal, and they clinked their glasses together in celebration.

“Many happy returns,” Randal heard himself instinctively say in reply. He frowned and shook his head. “Sorry, I’m not quite sure why I should have said that.”

“It’s actually rather appropriate,” grinned Tenzing. “Today the wanderer has returned and there is, indeed, a birthday to celebrate. So yes, many happy returns.”

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Randal awoke in the middle of the night and leapt out of bed. He couldn’t work out where he was for a few moments, and it took him some time to find his bearings. A torrent of memories had suddenly come flooding back and they greatly disturbed him. He turned on the light, hurriedly put on his clothes and dashed downstairs. It was quite dark down there, though there were occasional low night lights and the full moon was shining in through the domed window in the ceiling of the hallway, which helped him find his way.

He was sure that he’d made no sound upstairs and yet Tenzing must have heard him. Peering over the balcony in his dressing gown and nightcap, and seeing him down below, the man turned on the hallway lights and descended the wide sweeping staircase to see what might be amiss.

“What’s the matter?” Tenzing asked him, looking concerned as he caught him up. He peered long and deep into Randal’s eyes, as if searching his soul.

“I shouldn’t be here.”

“But it was your time, Randal. And this is your home.”

“There’s work to be done.”

He looked at his hands and saw there was fresh blood on his fingers.

“Yes, but not now. There are others in place to complete the work.”

“I have to get back.”

“But you've only just arrived, my friend.”

“Heléna needs me. I need to be with her.”

“Heléna will be cared for. She'll find another ....”

“Oh, Tenzing, you make it all sound so clinical.”

“Come, Randal, sit with me and we'll talk a while.”

Half dazed, he wandered through to the study and they sat down together on the sofa.

“I've given the matter a lot of thought, and I'd like Heléna to join us, Tenzing.”

“And, given her calibre, given time and given her destiny, I'm sure she will, Randal.”

Randal shook his head repeatedly. “No, no, I don't mean 'next time round, maybe.'”

Tenzing headed for the cocktail cabinet. “Then what do you mean?” he asked, handing Randal a nightcap and sitting himself back down.

“I'd like her to join the family. I'd like to go before the Council as her sponsor, plead her case and have her fast tracked.”

Tenzing took a sip of her drink, and seemed lost in thought. “And? That's not all, is it, Randal?”

Randal shook his head. “No. I'd also like to go back to help her. I feel that my work there is incomplete.”

“Well, if there's nothing I can say to dissuade you, Randal, that is also something that you'd have to take to the Council. It's certainly not something I could authorize.”

“If I can get authorization from them to sponsor Heléna, then that's something I could do on my own initiative.”

Tenzing shook his head. “Randal, you and I both know full well that it would be utter madness for you to go it alone. Sheer folly. You must, must, must go through official channels. I cannot emphasize that sufficiently. If the Council got one whiff of this, then you could find your way well and truly blocked. And where would that leave you and Heléna? Take my advice, Randal: for heaven's sake, man, play this by the book.”

Tenzing's voice softened. “Having said that, you're a past master, Randal, and you perhaps know a thing or two that you choose not to wear like chevrons on your sleeves. I respect and value your judgement. And I wish you the best of luck with the Council. If you're in need of a good reference, please feel free to

use my name.”

“Now, how's about we turn in for the night, eh? Let's look at this again tomorrow with clear heads and fresh eyes, and we'll see about getting in touch with the Council.”



## 23. A rude awakening

Randal awoke with a hideous scream and held up his hand before him. The doctor had just pulled out another of his fingernails and there was blood pouring from the wound.

"I think perhaps it's time we resorted to the dental drill," the man announced, tossing the bloody pliers on the table before him.

In that brief second, catching his two minders off guard, Randal leapt up, reached across the table, snatched up the sharp pointed, snipe nosed pliers and with all his might he hit the doctor in the centre of the forehead. So great was the force and the intent behind the action, that with an awful cracking of bone, he drove the pliers nearly three inches into the man's skull. All this before the thugs behind him could blink.

The assistant came back into the room wheeling an ancient dentists' drill on a stand and she watched, horrified as the doctor staggered back across the room and then fell to the floor, as if pole-axed. For a few moments he writhed about and convulsed uncontrollably, then he lay still.

One of the thugs behind Randal was momentarily too mesmerized to act, but the other lunged for him. But in that brief moment, Randal threw himself to one side and escaped the man's clutches. Then he made a dash for the collection of implements in the corner, snatched up a claw hammer and spun round to face the bruiser who was coming from him again. At the last second, he deftly sidestepped, and the man crashed heavily into the wooden trolley, overturning it. And in that instant, Randal swung the heavy claw hammer and brought it crashing down on the man's skull from behind. There was an awful and disgusting cracking noise and then the man sprawled out across the trolley and gradually sank to the floor, with the head of the hammer still firmly lodged in his skull.

He turned to face the other thug, but seeing Randal coming at him with the look of the devil incarnate in his eyes, he simply turned tail and ran off down the corridor, vomiting as he went.

As for the doctor's rotund assistant, she simply stood there, transfixed, and when Randal looked her in the eye, with his most

withering gaze, she fainted on the spot.

Randal spotted the heavy set of keys on a chain by the guard's hip. Bracing himself with his foot against the man's leg, and grimacing from the pain in his fingers, Randal grabbed hold of the keys and yanked with all his might, wrenching the chain free of the man's belt.

Like a man possessed, picking up a long knife from the scattered contents of the upturned trolley, Randal pelted down the stone stone corridor, following the trail of vomit and hoping that he was heading in the right direction and not further into the bowels of the castle.

At the end of the corridor, a flight of stone steps led upwards and beyond that he could see light. He quickly ascended, taking the steps two at a time. There was a door at the top and fortunately it had been left wide open as the remaining guard made his own hasty escape.

Heaven only knows how he was going to get out of the castle, though: those were Randal's thoughts as he ran up those stone steps. He could only hope that the other guards would not be alerted and that he could fend them off through sheer adrenaline and tenacity.

But when he emerged from the darkness, he found that he was not in some medieval castle at all, as the doctor had had him believe. It was just a rambling and partially derelict house, and the dungeons no more than a bricked up basement. So much for the ancestral castle. As for the remaining guard, he heard the revving of an engine outside and tyres skidding on loose gravel, and the man was careering down the drive and away from the house as fast as he could.

Not daring to risk staying around for a moment longer, Randal tossed the knife and keys aside and ran out of the open front door and down the gravel drive to make good his own escape. At the bottom of the drive, a narrow country road stretched to left and right, and Randal had no way of knowing which way to head. There were a few houses in the far distance, to the left, and perhaps he might come across a road sign or a villager whom he could ask, so he headed in that direction. He ran on for perhaps two miles before his exertions began to catch up with him and he tucked himself in out of sight of the road and sat

down to catch his breath and relieve his aching muscles which had begun to cramp. Only then did he again begin to feel the excruciating, stinging pain in his hands. His fingers were an absolute mess and his shirt was splattered with blood.

Randal pushed himself to his feet and pressed on, anxious to be away from the area in case the Green Shirts should summon reinforcements and organize a search. If they had dogs, then he'd be done for. There was a ditch running alongside the road with running water in it and he left the road and staggered on, using the ditch water to wash away his scent. Only as he approached the village did he again venture onto the road.

As he'd hoped, coming to a crossroads he saw an ageing wooden road sign. The paint was peeling away, but fortunately he could still make out the words. The problem was, he didn't recognize any of the names on the pointers of the road sign and the sign gave no indication of which way led east toward the border. The only thing he did find out, seeing an old mill stone marking the edge of the village up ahead, was that he was at a place called Middle Wallop.

He staggered up the dusty road toward the village, fighting to catch his breath. A few hundred yards ahead on the right he could make out a swinging sign sticking out at the front of a building and though he couldn't read the writing, he guessed that would be the village pub. Just opposite that there was the familiar green livery of a public phone box.

The significance of this passed Randal by for a few moments, and then he looked again. A green phone box could mean only one thing he realized and almost let out a whoop of joy. The phone boxes in Gothgoria were all painted red. Again the doctor had lied to him. He was not in Gothgoria at all, but still somewhere in the Freelands.

And it suddenly occurred to him that if he could remember the number he'd been given to use in emergencies, he could let whoever it was at the other end know that he was safe and well and tell them his current whereabouts.

Again for a time Brandon left the road and sat behind some bushes while he caught his breath, feverishly searching his mind for that elusive telephone number. He had no money to pay for the call, of course, but he'd been told that in such an event he

should let the phone ring three times and then put the phone down and they would ring him back, or else he should try to contact the operator and arrange to reverse the call charges. Of course, all this was academic if he couldn't remember the number to call. He closed his eyes and thought hard, trying to picture Marion Streiker telling him the number and him memorizing it. Following her advice, he'd tried to visualize a series of memorable scenes.

The first digit was easy, he suddenly realized: it was him emerging from a prison and leaping up and down on the spot crying "I'm free; I'm free!" To which a child nearby, quite unimpressed, retorted: "So what? I'm four." That number was, of course, three, and indeed the next was four. Leaving prison, he found himself transported to heaven, so the third digit was seven. And after that, the scene repeated itself, but not in a circle, but in a spiral. The first three digits were repeated but each had one added on. Of course, the number was Sher Point 347458.

Brandon got to his feet and staggered off down the road toward the phone box.

"Oh, good lord," a woman cried, from behind a hedge which she was busily pruning, seeing this bloodied figure approaching. "Are you all right, young man? Can I help?"

"I'm sorry, it looks far worse than it actually is. Don't worry, I'm fine. I'm just going to the phone box to call a friend."

She was insistent that he come into the house and let her see to his wounds – not thinking for a moment that he might be some deranged creature escaped from the asylum – and he had a devil of a job persuading her otherwise.

But when he got to the phone box to find the phone chord ripped out and the coin box vandalized, he retraced his steps and, thanking her kindly, asked if she could help.

"Aye, doesn't surprise me one bit," she nodded vigorously when he told her about the phone. "That'll be those ruddy yobs from East Wallop again."

"Is there another phone in the village?" he asked.

"Never mind the phone just now, love, the first thing we need to do is get those wounds sorted out. Come through to the kitchen with me and I'll boil a kettle and get my first aid kit."

The woman was appalled when she began to bathe his hands

and saw his missing finger nails.

“Lord preserve us, what animal would do a thing like this to you?” she wanted to know. He felt that honesty was the best policy and told her that it was the Green Shirts. Fortunately this explanation seemed to satisfy her and she didn't press the matter.

Finally, his fingers thoroughly bandaged, she put her first aid kit away, emptied the bowl of bloody water and suggested she brewed them a nice pot of tea. She even offered to share her dinner with him, but he said that he'd happily settle for a biscuit or two.

While the kettle was boiling, the lady went off upstairs and returned with a clean shirt. “Here, love, put this on. It belonged to my late husband, bless his heart, and I've been meaning to have a clear out.” As the water came to the boil and the tea brewed in the pot, she helped him button the shirt and went on at length about her dear husband, George.

“Well, Missus Morris,” Randal said at length, getting up from the armchair. “I'm very grateful for your help, for the delicious tea and for your delightful company. Alas, I need to be getting off now.”

The lady rose to her feet. “You'll be wanting the telephone, then. There's one just down the road in the pub.” She looked at her watch. “It's not far off lunch, so the pub should be open by now.”

Thanking her again, Randal trotted off down the road to the pub.

Apologizing to the landlady that he had no money on him to pay for a drink, he asked if he might use the phone. He explained that he was stranded in the village and that he'd have to phone friends and arrange a lift home. Fortunately, the lady seemed to be an understanding and amenable sort and was quite happy to help him out. She passed the phone over the bar to him.

Picking up the receiver, he dialled the number, let the phone ring three times, replaced the receiver and waited. Meanwhile the landlady had poured him a small glass of beer. “On the house,” she smiled. He thanked her and took a swig. After his incarceration, it was a delight. “Sheer nectar,” he beamed. Of course, it hadn't escaped the lady's attention that he'd been in the wars, so he began to give her a very brief account of the woe that

had befallen him.

“Green Shirts, eh?” she nodded knowingly. “I wouldn't put anything past those devils.”

Moments later the phone rang and he answered it.

“Hello, Sher Point 347458. Who's speaking please?”

He recognized the voice immediately. It was Rosalie Muller.

“Rosalie, is that you?”

“Speaking.”

“It's Randal Smith, a student at *Foxholes*.”

“Oh, good Lord, where on earth have you been?”

“It's a long story. Listen, I'm at a little village called Middle Wallop. Hang on a minute, I'll see if I can find out where exactly ....”

“No need, Randal. I've been through there a time or two.”

“I'm stranded here, Rosalie. Can you arrange to have me picked up?”

“I can do better than that, Randal. I'll come and pick you up myself. It's about three hours away, so – what time is it now? Twelve thirty. You can expect me around four thirty. Let's say five at the latest. Where shall we meet? There's a delightful little pub there. I'll meet you around there.”

“Yes, that's where I'm phoning from. It's called *The Sly Trout*.”

“Oh, good. Okay, I'll ring off now and I'll set off straight away.”

That was wonderful news. “Cheers. See you soon.”

Randal thanked the landlady and passed the phone back to her.

“All sorted out, love?” she asked.

“Yes thanks. My friend will be here around four thirty,” he told her, taking another swig of his drink and was on the point of drinking up and leaving.

“No need to dash off, love. Here, let me top your drink up and you can go through to the lounge. There's a television in there to while away your time. Don't be afraid to swap channels if you don't like what's on.”



True to her word, Rosalie Muller was there to meet him at just gone twenty to five that afternoon, and she brought Dave and

Logan with her, perhaps for added muscle as much as company. Both of them knew how to handle themselves.

“Heavens you're in such a mess, Randal,” she uttered when she first caught sight of him.

“Green Shirts” he replied. But first: “I have to know – is Helen all right?” That's what he wanted to know at the outset.

Rosalie nodded. “Yes, she's been beside herself with worry, though, and sends her love.”

“That's a relief. Far more important than what might have happened to me.”

Rosalie Muller was clearly concerned. “So what did happen?”

He showed her his bandaged hands and she could see the blood seeping through the fingers. “They did that with a pair of pliers.”

“Dear Lord,” she gasped. “Okay, first things first: is there anything you're in urgent need of?”

He nodded eagerly. “Food,” he replied. “Lots of food. I haven't eaten for days. In fact, I still don't even know what day of the week it is.”

“Well, under normal circumstances I'd suggest that we ate here, but on this occasion I think the sooner we get you away from here the better. David, here are the keys. Randal, you sit in the front so we can talk on the way. I'll see if the landlady has any sandwiches or other cold food made up and I'll be along in a couple of minutes.”

Five minutes later, Rosalie rejoined them and plonked a large brown paper bag in Randal's lap. “Tuck in,” she said. “They didn't have any sandwiches ready, and I'm very reluctant to hang around here, but I did manage to get you a pork pie, a slice of bacon and egg flan and a couple of packets of crisps. Anyhow, it'll tide you over until we're a bit nearer home. And then we'll talk.”

Randal was already three bites into the pork pie. This was not an occasion to stand on ceremony.

Dave was impatient to hear what had happened to Randal and so, between mouthfuls, Randal began his tale, beginning with being stabbed in the backside, presumably with a syringe, and the long journey in the car.

“Yes, as soon we saw that you were missing, we realized

something fishy must have happened. There was no way you'd have buggered off without your new PC," nodded Logan.

When Dave heard the name "Ulrich", you could almost hear his jaw drop.

"His assistant addressed him as 'Doctor.'"

"Holy shit," he said. "You do realize who that is, don't you? Well, I'll tell you something, Lucian is going to be seriously pissed off with us."

"No, why's that?"

"Ulrich is Lucian's younger brother. Though like 'Chatterhume Castle', 'Doctor' is stretching things a bit far. I'm told he was trained as a chiropodist and that for many years the family lived in a dilapidated old terraced house in a district famed not so much for its landowning aristocrats as its slums." Then: "So what the hell brought Ulrich George all this way to kidnap and torture you? It must be a good way up their agenda."

"He wanted to know what the purpose of the messaging system was and to know the technical ins and outs."

"Was Comms Net mentioned?"

He shook his head. "No, not once. He did want to know about The Network, but I got away before he had a chance to get round to that. His assistant and the thug who got away weren't exactly the brightest stars in the galaxy, so much of what Ulrich might have gleaned will have died with him."

"Well, that's a blessing. So what did you tell him?"

"Very little, really. If you'll forgive my language, I seem to recall telling him to go screw himself and to rot in hell on more than one occasion," Randal replied, finishing off the last of the pork pie. He couldn't get the crisp packet open, what with the bulky bandages and the pain in his fingers, and had to enlist Logan's assistance.

"Fortunately, I was out of it most of the time, so strangely enough I didn't feel the pain so much. The breathing exercises helped a little, of course." And he went on to tell them about the vision he'd had in his cell of Tenzing. They seemed to take that minor revelation in their stride, perhaps putting it down to mere delirium, and he went on to tell them about waking up in the meadow, finding Tenzing by the stream and going with him to the stately house. You could tell by the looks on their faces that they



thought this rather odd. However, he didn't mention the talk he'd had with Tenzing about Helen.

"Could be they slipped some kind of psychoactive substance into your drink," Dave suggested as Randal finished off the crisps and made a start on the flan.

"Back to the messaging system," Dave said, "I didn't realize that it had attracted their attention."

"Ulrich mentioned that – quote – a dickie bird had told him about it – unquote. The one thing I stupidly let slip when I heard this was to ask him if that dickie bird happened to be a homing pigeon. And not only did he not deny this, he went so far as to say that they'd have to be more careful in future ..."

Rosalie finished his sentence off: "... which more or less confirms that we have a spy in our midst."

"Yes, that's the impression I got," he nodded, passing the second bag of crisps for Logan to open on his behalf.

"Thanks," said Dave, helping himself. "Don't mind if I do."

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When they arrived at *Foxholes*, having been on the lookout for them all evening, Helen came dashing down the steps at the front of the main building to greet him.

"Oh, thank God you're safe, Randal," she cried, the tears streaming down her pretty face. "I've been beside myself with worry."

"And your friend Dave's been doing his nut," she added in hushed tones. "He has a funny way of showing it, at times, but you know, he cares a lot deep down."

Unable to sweep her up in his arms due to his wounds, she clasped him round the neck and settled for a lingering kiss, almost hopping up and down on the spot. Her eyes were filled with tears of excitement and relief. That was the first thing they did when Randal got back. The second thing he did – at her insistence and with her assistance – was to have a long soak in the bath. And the third thing was to see if there was any food to be found in the cafeteria's fridge.

Tenzing wanted to see him, of course, as he was deeply concerned for Randal's well-being, but that would simply have to wait until the next day.

24. Debriefing

The next day, even before Tenzing had spoken with Randal, though perhaps having been briefed by Rosalie Muller, instructions were issued and posted in the students' pigeon holes. Until further notice, all students were to seek permission from Tenzing or Matron before venturing out of the grounds and would only be allowed out if travelling in a group or with at least one member of staff.

And from that point on, Seth the groundsman, Louis the caretaker and his young assistant Brian were seldom seen, when patrolling the grounds on an evening, without a shotgun crooked under their arm. Clearly, following Randal's kidnapping, Tenzing was taking the matter most seriously.

It was almost lunchtime before Tenzing and Randal spoke. Randal spent the first hour being checked over by Matron and having his bandages changed to something a little more functional and appropriate. And, at her suggestion given his recent trauma, he was excused studies for the next couple of days. He would have been quite happy to get back into the swing of things at the college, but she was having none of it.

"A word to the wise, Randal. Take the opportunity to spend more time with Helen," she advised him, with a knowing look. "This has not been an easy time for her and she has real need of you. I'll arrange for her to be given time off from her own studies. Take Helen out and show her the sights."

"Thank you," he beamed. "That's very thoughtful of you, Matron."

"You're welcome, Randal. That's what friends are for." Then: "Helen is a lot more confident and outgoing these days, but she is quite vulnerable still and she has her moments of insecurity. So above all: show Helen that you really care for her."

These were wise and timely words, indeed. His separation from Louise immediately sprang to mind, of course, and quite forcefully. And he sensed an unspoken, yet implied "... unless ...". Sometimes people on the outside looking in had a clearer understanding of, or a better feel for, such matters. Certainly,

when he and Louise had split, he'd been the very last to know that anything was amiss and that she'd found herself a fancy man who would give her what she desired or needed. If these things were coming back to haunt him, then the chances were that it was due to a lesson having not been learnt (which was the intellectual and moral part of the process) and, above all, thoroughly taken to heart.

"Thank you, Matron. I'm indeed grateful for your advice," he replied, bowing his head.

When Randal knocked and entered Tenzing's study, he found Rosalie, Helen and Dave already there. They'd awaited his arrival before ordering refreshments from the staff. The five of them made light chit-chat while they drank their coffee, and then spent a few minutes practising their breathing to settle and balance themselves, before moving on to weightier matters.

Though Rosalie had no doubt already briefed Tenzing, the director wanted to hear Randal's account first-hand. When he mentioned Chatterhume Castle, in passing, Tenzing laughed.

"There actually is such a place," the man told him, and he got up and showed Randal a map on the wall. Just as the doctor had said, about thirty miles into Gothgoria from the south of the Freelands was a place called Chatterhume, beside which was the tiny symbol of a castle. And stuck in place, piercing that symbol, was a map pin with a bright red head. "Needless to say, that is not Lucian's ancestral home. It actually now belongs to a wealthy mill owner. Or at least it did until recently. It could well be that the place has since been requisitioned by the Green Shirts."

"So whereabouts was I really held?" Randal asked.

Tenzing searched around on the map and tapped his finger by a village near the town of Walstead, which was almost as far south but some five miles this side of the border.

"So what's with the big red map pin?" Presumably he'd stuck the pin in the map after Rosalie briefed him.

Tenzing smiled. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

"It'll all make sense on another day, perhaps," the director said and, returning to their chairs none the wiser, Randal resumed his account.

When he'd finished and they'd held a short discussion, once

again Tenzing led them in a quite lengthy and deep guided meditation to properly close the session. This was primarily focussed on energy flow and was probably as much for Randal and Helen's benefit as anything, and it certainly livened them up for the best part of that day.

25. Open day

The days and weeks passed and gradually their concerns faded into the distance. Today was the beginning of the Harvest Holidays and, though school was out, all resident hands were on deck to prepare for the many visitors. Today was Open Day.

The overall schedule was pretty much the same from year to year, though they tried to vary the individual attractions, so there was always an element of surprise. First thing after breakfast, all the students were assembled in the hall for a group meditation, led by Tenzing, before they set to work preparing for the big day. From ten until three in the afternoon, it was the Fête. They set up stalls and a large marquee outdoors whenever the weather allowed, though there were contingency plans to bring many of the attractions inside should it prove too windy or wet.

In the afternoon the staff, students and specially invited friends and benefactors sat down to devour a hearty feast. Once that was over and the food had begun to digest, with the exception of those staff and students given the task of circulating amongst the friends and keeping them well serviced and entertained, there were a couple of hours of frantic activity behind the scenes as they busily dismantled the stalls and cleared up after the meal. Never shy of rolling up his sleeves and mucking in, Tenzing spent a good half hour beavering away in the kitchen before returning to the library to circulate amongst the guests and relieve Rosalie Muller and Harold Grainger while the hall was being prepared and transformed.

And finally, freshened up and changed into less casual attire, in the evening there was a ball. Most years it was a formal occasion and dark suits, white shirts and black ties were obligatory for the menfolk, whilst long, flowing ball gowns were obligatory for their invited womenfolk. But on this occasion it was to be a masquerade ball. Almost without exception they had managed to get hold of costumes in the city or else had run the costumes up on a sewing machine themselves or with the assistance of Miss Phelps who doubled up as college seamstress and part-time cook. And those few without a costume were issued

with ornate or comical masks by the students who greeted them at the door.

Miss Phelps was also on hand that evening with her sewing box, in case there should be any unfortunate or embarrassing wardrobe malfunctions. As for Matron, she came armed with a pocket full of safety pins for those whose costumes the dear lady deemed a little too risqué.

26. Unwelcome guests

“My dear Mister Rinchen,” came a lilting voice behind Tenzing and he and Randal turned around to see who it might be. He didn't recognize the voice, though clearly it was that of a woman, and the figure's costume and sequin-studded silver mask concealed her identity. “I've heard so much about you and of the wonderful work you do and have been dying to meet you all evening.”

“I'm sorry, you have me at something of a disadvantage, Madam” he remarked.

The slim lady held out a matching sequin-studded glove and for a moment he was unsure of whether he should shake the hand or kiss it.

“You may call me Melissa,” she cooed and, though he could only presume so, her face hidden behind her mask, he took it that she smiled.

In the end he settled for simply holding her delicate hand for a moment and giving a little bow. “Please, let's not stand on ceremony. Call me Tenzing.”

“Tenzing it is, then. Oh, forgive me, I hope I haven't interrupted your conversation?”

“No, no, not at all.”

The lady nodded in Randal's direction. “And who is this fine young gentleman?” she enquired.

“And you must forgive my own ignorance, Melissa. This is a student of ours, Randal Smith.”

“Really,” the lady put a hand to her mouth. “Not *the* Randal Smith?”

“The one and only,” Tenzing smiled.

“My word, this *is* an occasion. Meeting both Tenzing and Randal Smith.”

The lady moved closer to Tenzing and took him under the arm. “Is there somewhere we could go to have a discreet word?” she asked.

“Oh, I don't keep any secrets from my students,” Tenzing told her. “Randal is a trusted friend.”

“Well, Randal is most welcome to come along, of course.” She lent toward Tenzing and said in hushed tones. “You see, I do so admire the work you do for The Network ...”

“Network?” he queried, blanking her.

“Oh, come, come, Tenzing. There's no need to be coy with me. You see, my dear husband Jack and I are not short of a penny or two and have no family to support. Being so enamoured of the good work you do, we were hoping that you might accept a donation to further your cause.”

The woman tapped her hand against the side of her shoulder bag in which, presumably, she kept her purse.

“I see.”

“So, since this is clearly such a delicate matter, I was hoping that we might have a few words and make arrangements alone. I'm not talking pin money, you understand, but a regular and substantial bursary.”

Tenzing wondered whether they might talk about this on another occasion, but was reluctant to offend the lady.

“As I say, Randal is most welcome to come along.”

“Very well, perhaps we make take a stroll together in the quadrangle. Or perhaps in my study. You understand that I have other guests to attend to, so we may have to continue the conversation another day ...”

“Of course, I quite understand, and this will only take a few moments.” Again, the lady hooked her arm under Tenzing's. “Perhaps you might escort me to your study. Then we can have a sit down and I can get my purse to write you out your first cheque?”

“Certainly, my dear. Randal, if you have a moment, please come along with us.”

As they crossed the floor of the ballroom, Tenzing caught Dave's eye. “Dave, my good man,” he called out. “I shall be occupied for a few moments. Perhaps you and Heléna might circulate amongst our honoured guests? And you might get Logan or Louis to top up the punchbowl.”

“Will do.” Dave gave him the thumbs up and searched around the room to locate Helen and his kid brother.

When they arrived at Tenzing's study, he offered them a seat and went across to the cocktail cabinet. “May I offer you a

drink?" he asked.

"Thank you, yes." Then: "Tenzing, dear, would you mind opening the door into the garden? I've come over all hot and flushed," the lady requested, fanning her face.

"Certainly." He went to the glass door, opened it a few inches and propped it open with the polished granite door stop, then returned with their drinks and sat down with them. "Your good health," he toasted them.

The lady put her glass down and reached for her purse. But instead of bringing out her chequebook and pen as might be expected, she brought out a snub nosed automatic pistol.

Tenzing carefully returned his glass to the coffee table and sank back in his chair.

"You don't seem very surprised, Tenzing," the lady noted.

"No, I'm not, really. I thought that something like this would happen sooner or later. That it was just a matter of time."

Something appeared to dawn on Randal at that point and he chipped in: "I know that voice, despite your attempts to disguise it. You're Gelder Barton, Lucian's 'bit of stuff'."

The lady whipped off her mask and shook her head to allow her long auburn hair to fall into place. "Yes, you're quite correct, young man. But for your information, I am not his 'bit of stuff', nor his 'bit on the side'. We were married some time ago."

At that moment, there was a distinctive rap on the door. Two quiet knocks in quick succession, a pause and then another three. "Come in," she called across the room.

The door opened and a second masked figure entered, closing the door behind him.

"Well, look what the cat's dragged in. And who might this be, I wonder?" Tenzing enquired. "No, don't tell me"

The man whipped off his mask and stood there, looking every bit the lord and master.

"Long time no see, Tenzing," the man smirked. "Gelder, get me a drink would you, love? In fact you'd better bring the decanter over and fill our friends' glasses. It looks like they're in need of a stiff drink."

The man took his glass, drained it in one and reached out to top it up. As for Tenzing, he hadn't taken a sip.

"Fosdyke and Harris not here yet?"

"I'm sure they'll be here soon." She nodded to the open door into the garden.

"Good. So, this must be the young upstart Randal Smith? You know, I am seriously, seriously pissed off with you. If it wasn't for all the information in that thick skull of yours, I'd drop you right here and now. But then again, I guess that if you hadn't done what you did, then I wouldn't be here today. As they say, ever dark cloud has its silver lining."

"What do you want with us?" asked Tenzing.

Lucian reached inside the dark robes he wore and brought out a pistol. "What I propose is that we all go on a little journey," he said at length, finishing off the second glass. "You know, this hooch isn't bad at all. What is it?"

"We call it *chungari*, which means herb of enlightenment," Tenzing told him. "That's one of the active ingredients. But you didn't come here to talk about wine."

"I thought we might take up where my brother Ulrich so sadly left off. I have a little castle a few miles over the border – my centre of operations – and I think you'll find that it's somewhat more difficult to escape from than Middle Wallop. I had the moat stocked with Dravinian Fighting Fish. Vicious little critters they are, with a voracious appetite. When they attack, and they attack as a shoal, they make the water look like it's boiling. I have it on good authority that they can completely strip the carcass of an ox within five minutes."

"Whose authority?"

"My ex-wife, the cow," replied the man drily. "May she forever rest in peace."

At that moment, two more masked figures appeared, framed in the doorway to the garden. "Anyhow," Lucian said, finishing off his drink. He motioned toward the door with his pistol. "It's time we were leaving."

27. Gone

Dave stepped to one side of the door and gingerly turned the handle, hoping that the faint click of the catch would not be heard. He nodded as his kid brother kicked the door in and dived for cover.

Jobsworth stood there and waved his old army revolver around the room, but it was empty, the door into the garden was open and swinging to and fro, and the occupants were gone.

Logan got to his feet and dashed to the open door, but there was no sign of Tenzing or Randal.

Purely out of habit, seeing the full glass on the table, Dave reached down and picked it up. "Don't mind if I do," he chirped up, never one to let good drink go to waste. He was about to take a swig of the drink when he noticed a strange red object in the bottom of the glass. Fishing it out, he saw that it was a big red map pin.

"Oh well, down the hatch," he said, tossing the map pin on the table and polishing off the drink.

And then a thought occurred to him. He strode over to the map and searched around. There was Chatterhume; there was the castle; and there was the hole where the red map pin had been. "Why, the cunning old fox, he must have known all along."

"What's that you say, bro'?"

"Nothing, I'll explain later."

"Louis," he called, spinning on his heel.

"Yes, Mister Jones?"

"Louis, I need to borrow Tenzing's car. I believe you have a spare set of keys?"

"But"

"Louis, Louis, this is no time for ifs and buts or 'more than me job's worth'. Tenzing and Randal have been taken."

"Taken, you say? Where?"

He turned back and stabbed his finger repeatedly on the map. "A place near Chatterhume, a few miles across the border in Gothgoria."

"You sure?"

“Absolutely sure. Listen, just trust me, will you? We have no time to lose.”

“You can have the car on one condition.”

“What's that?”

“I'm coming with you. And Seth, most likely. Give me a minute while I go find him.” The man was already half way out of the door.

“Okay, we'll meet you in the car park.”



It was a long drive south that night and it was gone midnight as they finally approached the border.

“What now?” Logan asked, seeing the border post looming up ahead. There was a barrier across the road and as they got nearer, a guard came out of the tiny wooden shack and raised his arm, signalling them to stop.

“Just stay calm,” Dave requested, pulling up just short of the wooden shack and getting out of the car to talk to the guard. Moments later, the guard slumped to the floor.

“Damn it,” Dave swore and called back to the car: “Bro', come and give me a hand here, would you?”

They carried the guy back to the shack and dumped him in a chair, then Dave tore the phone from its cable. On the way out, he flung the phone into the bushes.

“Surely he's not dead?” Seth wanted to know as Logan raised the barrier and Dave got back in the car.

“No, but he'll have a bit of a headache when he wakes up.”

“Won't he be missed?”

Dave drove through the checkpoint and waited with the engine running while Logan caught up and climbed in beside him.

“Well, it's his own fault. I told him that I was on an official errand and that the car and its occupants had diplomatic immunity, on account of Tenzing, but he wouldn't listen. I even asked him to phone his superiors who would back up our story.”

“It's going to take some explaining.”

“We'll let Tenzing worry about that,” Dave replied, putting the car in gear and driving on. “Providing we get there in time ...”

He'd driven south at a fair lick, so Tenzing couldn't be that

much further ahead and, indeed, as he sped on at last he caught sight of a set of red tail lights. He'd turned his headlights off when they were clear of the border, using only his side lights, and decided that he'd best douse even these, so that they wouldn't be spotted.

"Where next, bro'?" he asked Logan who was pouring over a map with the aid of a flash light. He peered into the night but could see no sign of the red tail lights.

"There should be a sharp left up ahead," Logan told him. Then you take the first turning off to the right."

Dave cursed as the bend approached, slamming on the brakes and slewing the car round to avoid the stone wall. "Shit, that was close."

There ahead, he got a brief glimpse of the tail lights, then they were gone. They must have taken the turning to the right.

Not wishing to get too close to the vehicle ahead, he took his foot off the accelerator. Fortunately, though there was decent moon, the sky was mostly overcast that night.

"Then where?" he asked.

"Drive on for another four or five miles. It's a pretty windy road, so keep an eye out for the bends. By then you should be able to see the castle. It stands maybe a couple of hundred yards back from this road, to the left."

They drove on for a time, keeping well back from the other car. Seeing the vehicle disappear off the road, he more or less coasted down the hill for a few hundred yards, then pulled the car off the road and into the trees. "Well, this is where we get out and walk, folks," he announced, turning off the engine and pocketing the keys.

He changed his mind. "On second thoughts, whoever makes it back here will find the keys still in the ignition."

"The sounds ominous," Logan remarked.

Dave shrugged. "I'm just hoping that there'll only be a few of them here at this country retreat," he said. "If there's a regiment, then we're screwed."

He reached into the dashboard and pulled out Tenzing's trusty old revolver, checking it for ammo and pocketing the spares.

"How many rounds have you got, Seth?" he asked, nodding at the shotgun.

“Got two up the breech and a couple of dozen cartridges in my pocket,” he said, patting the gun.

“Good lord, you did come prepared for battle. What about you, Louis?”

“Six loaded and a couple in reserve.”

Dave felt in his pockets and handed Jobsworth a few more cartridges. “Here, best take these.”

“Logan?”

“I've got a knife.” Then: “What's on your mind, Dave?”

“I'm thinking maybe it would be safer if you stayed in the car.”

“And I've got my hands and feet,” Logan told him.

“Of course.” Dave had risen to the ranks of brown belt at martial arts. His kid brother had gone on to black belt. He was a mean fighting machine – and a darn sight quieter than they would be.

“Okay, let's go,” he decided at length, climbing out of the car. “If nothing else, we'll take a few of the grunts with us,” he remarked philosophically.

They skirted around the high wall which ran along the perimeter of the grounds. Though here and there the wall was punctuated by pretend towers which acted as buttresses to support the structure, it was little more than a garden wall, albeit too high for them to scale.

A few yards further on, they came to the main gates, which were closed and firmly padlocked. They stood some nine or ten feet tall and though Dave and Logan could have scaled them easily, they'd have been there all night trying to heave Seth and Jobsworth over. Their army days were long ago and they were well past their physical prime. At least the gate appeared unguarded.

“Well, Mister Jones, what are we waiting for?” Jobsworth wanted to know. “Bugger it, I knew I should have brought my tool kit. Has anybody got a hair grip?”

Dave fished around in his pockets and managed to find a half-eaten toffee and a large paper clip. “Is that any use?”

“That's the ticket,” nodded Jobsworth and he stretched the paper clip out, doubled it up and bent the end over. Logan stood by the man's side, with his flash light, as he poked around in the

wards of the lock.

“Any luck?” asked Dave, checking his watch in the glow of Logan's torch. It was gone one o'clock.

“Two down and one to go,” Jobsworth whispered. Then, with a loud click, the lock was open and the man unwound the thick chain that secured the gate. He was about to toss the chains in a nearby bush but Logan thought he might hang onto them, and weighed the heavy chain in his hand before stuffing it in his jacket pocket.

Once inside the gates, they skirted along the side of the driveway in the shadows for fear of being heard trampling in the loose gravel. Slowly but surely they approached the castle proper. There was a narrow moat running around the walls and a drawbridge. Real or fake they couldn't tell, but in any case, the drawbridge was down. That was the good news. The bad news was that there was a guard sitting in the shadows over the far side of the moat, under a stone archway. There were two stout oak doors set into the archway and as far as they could tell that was the only way in. The guy wore the peaked hat of the Green Shirts and had what looked like a rifle beside him, propped against the wall as he enjoyed a quiet fag.

They edged closer, keeping to the shadows.

“How we gonna get past him?” asked Seth in a whisper.

“Oh, for a simple bow and arrow,” hissed Dave. “We could take him out from here, I'm sure, but that would blow our cover.”

Logan grinned mischievously. “Leave it to me,” he whispered and he slithered away through the long grass toward the drawbridge, with the blunt edge of his knife gripped between his teeth.

Without warning, the guard tossed his dog end¹⁴ away and rose to his feet. He picked up his rifle, slung it over his shoulder and, scratching his backside as he went, he started to walk across the drawbridge in their direction. Logan froze.

Then the man apparently changed his mind. Putting his rifle down, he turned to face the moat, unzipped his flies and began to urinate in the water. Seizing this chance, Logan got up and ran forward. With one hand cupped over the man's mouth and his head pushed back, he drove the knife deep under his ribs and up

14 Cigarette stub.

to penetrate his heart. There was a moment's struggle and then the man went limp.

Logan lowered the guard to the ground and slid his body over the side into the moat. Within moments, the water was seething and Logan jumped back in surprise. It was as if he'd dropped the man in a vat of boiling acid.

By now the others were close-by and he ran to join them by the oak doors. As they stood there, they heard footsteps from inside heading toward the doors and they pressed themselves into the shadows.

A hatchway in one of the great doors opened and another guard emerged. He saw Seth who was standing to his right and immediately turned, fumbling for the pistol at his waist. But in that moment Logan came up behind him and, with an awful scrunching sound, he twisted the man's neck, breaking it, then waited until the guard had been strangled and went limp.

"They certainly didn't teach you *that* in the girls' brigade," whispered Jobsworth.

Logan said nothing. He heaved the body onto the wooden drawbridge and slid it over the side. Again, within moments the water was seething.

"What the hell is that?" asked Dave.

Seth caught sight of one or two fish leaping around the corpse. "Seen that once afore, when I was in the army," he told them. "I reckon that's Dravinian Fighting Fish. Couple of minutes and they'll have stripped yon fellah down to the bone, boots and all."

"Okay lads, let's press on," Jobsworth advised them. "There's likely to be more of them inside, so let's keep our wits about us." He tentatively poked his head inside the open hatchway and peered around. There were lights inside, but fortunately they were all turned down quite low for the night.

They followed Jobsworth in though a narrow porch, through an inside door and gingerly out into an expansive hallway. Hearing footsteps echoing further down a corridor at the far end of the hallway, they scurried to one side to hide themselves in the shadow of a row of marble pillars. There were two guards approaching and one of them was heading their way. The other one had asked him to go and relieve the guard at the door and that

he'd be along in a minute with a brew up.

The guard heading for the doors didn't make it. In the same moment that he caught sight of Seth poking his head out from behind one of the pillars and pulling a funny face, Logan had taken him from behind.

"So this is what you got up to in the three years you were away," Dave whispered, helping pull the guard into the shadows. It was something that Logan had steadfastly refused to talk about, and still his brother didn't break his vow of silence.

The other guard was approaching now, carrying a steaming tin cup in each hand. "Same again, Seth. Dave, I want you to be ready to catch those tin cups before he drops them."

They dispatched the guard, sure enough, but not before one of the tin cups went clattering to the ground. Moments later, a bullet went whistling past their heads, to ricochet around the granite walls, and they had to dive for cover. It looked like war had finally broken out.

Dave was away like a shot through the shadows. Jobsworth let fly with his old service revolver, narrowly missing the guard, and Dave took aim.

Click. Tenzing's revolver misfired.

Just as the guard spotted him and turned to take a shot, Dave standing there with his hands held high, Jobsworth let off another shot which hit him fair and square in the chest, bowling him over.

Only then did Dave remember that for reasons known only to himself, Tenzing always loaded only the five bullets and kept the first chamber empty. Perhaps that's so he didn't accidentally blow his knackers to bits should the gun go off when he tucked it in his belt?

He gave Jobsworth the thumbs up and beckoned them on. "Thanks, Louis, you're a life saver. I owe you one."

Another shot rang out now, whistling through the air over their heads and as they turned to return fire, the assailant was already running off down the corridor. Throwing caution to the wind, Logan grabbed the prone guard's rifle and charged down the corridor after him, with Dave following close behind and Seth and Jobsworth bringing up the rear.

They were expecting their shots to be returned, but reaching a door at the far end of the corridor, the man hastily closed it

behind him, and when they arrived there, Seth and Jobsworth puffing and panting by this time, they found the door firmly bolted at the other side.

“Stand aside, gentlemen,” requested Seth. He took aim at the door and let go first with one barrel and then the other in the vicinity of the lock. The door was a mess of splintered wood, but still intact.

Seth broke the gun open, discharged the spent cartridges, loaded up again and fired a broadside, nearly bowling himself over in the process. This time, given a ferocious kicking by Logan, the door came away from its hinges and caved in.

Again a shot whistled past their heads and Dave and Jobsworth returned covering fire while Logan dived inside and rolled quickly away to one side.

“Don't make any sudden moves,” called the man in the room on the other side of the door. Dave could see now that it was Lucian himself and he stood there with a pistol pressed to Tenzing's right temple whilst to one side a woman was standing guard over Randal. It was Gelder Barton.

A moment later, Tenzing lifted his right foot and suddenly scraped his heel down Lucian's shin. Dave let off a shot with his revolver. He'd aimed for Lucian's head, but the bullet caught his hand instead and the gun went flying across the room behind a large mahogany desk.

Gelder stood up and turned to take a shot with Dave clearly in her sights, but moving closer, Seth let fly with his shotgun, hitting her in the chest and bowling her over.

Clutching his bleeding hand, Lucian scabbled around on the floor behind his desk. Finding his gun, he let off three wild shots.

Still some distance across the room and still on his belly, Logan took aim with the rifle. He pulled the trigger and Lucian was thrown back even before he heard the shot, caught in his right shoulder. Again the gun was flung from his grasp and he staggered back, framed in the stained glass window that dominated the far end of the room.

Coming forward with grim determination, Seth reloaded his shotgun and took aim, blasting Lucian full in the chest with both barrels. So great was the force that Lucian was blown backwards and, tripping over a step, he plunged head first through the

stained-glass window to join his friends in the seething moat below.

28. Time to go home

“How did you know we were in trouble?” Randal asked Dave.

“You remember Tenzing called across the ballroom to me. 'Dave,' he says: 'Perhaps you and Heléna might circulate amongst our honoured guests?’”

“So?”

“I though that a bit strange. Haven't you noticed how you're the only person other than my kid brother who calls me 'Dave'? Everyone else insists on calling me 'David.’”

“Ah, I see. Yes, of course, and the name Heléna is now taboo.”

“Yep, you got it.”

“But how did you know we'd be here? Was it just a long shot?”

“Quite a long shot, yes. A shot of *chungari* to be precise, and quite enlightening it was, too.”

Randal screwed his nose up, not quite understanding. “Explain.”

“Tenzing left his drink untouched. He must have known damn well that I'm never one to let good drink go to waste. So, thinking that I might as well polish it off, I happened to notice a strange object in the bottom of the glass.”

“Go on ...”

“It was a red pin, the one he'd used to mark Chatterhume Castle on the map.

“Isn't that right, Tenzing?” he asked the director who merely sat there smiling enigmatically.

“Yes, David. You've got it in one. You did all that I'd hoped for and more besides.”

Randal smiled with admiration. “Well, I'll be darned. Well done, that man.”

“Well done those *men*,” Dave corrected him.

“Yes,” Tenzing nodded. “You've all shown your true mettle this evening and I'm proud of you.”

Tenzing rose to his feet and turned to Randal with a twinkle

in his eye. “Friends, I think it's time we were returning home, don't you?”

Logan wrenched a fire axe from its stand on the wall and walked over to the racks of equipment that stood against the far wall of the room, to the right of Lucian's stately mahogany desk. “Before we leave, I suggest we trash the Nasty Party's servers.”

Dave put up his hand to stop him and scratched his chin. “No,” he said after a time. “Randal come with me. You remember those pix¹⁵ smuggled out of the death camp that Lucinda sent me?”

“Yeah. But some of those pictures are utterly sickening”

“Precisely. But truth is truth is truth, Randal.”

Dave fished three disks out of his jacket pocket. “If you can locate the files, I vote that we redesign their web site. And then we'll see what the good folk of Gothgoria have to say when instead of Lucian and his cronies' happy, smiling faces on the home page they are brought face to face with the grim reality behind the so-called 'enforced repatriations.’”

15 Pictures; photographs.

29. The aftermath

Within one day of the release of the harrowing pictures from the Gothgorian death camps, the story broke in the national press, which bravely decided to publish and be damned, and there was fury both in the Elected House and directed at the Elected House. Before the week was out, word had spread further afield and the Gothgorian embassies were besieged worldwide.

As the word spread, the tide of public opinion turned against the Green Shirts – and with a vengeance. The army and police severed their ties with the Party and turned a blind eye as the people tore down the party's sacred symbols and set their offices ablaze. Within a week, with the Gothgorian troops returning to their homeland, bewildered by this abrupt change of plan and the change in their fortunes, the attempted coup in Dravine was at an end.

The Gothgorian death camps were abandoned by the fleeing Green Shirts and the few remaining survivors were at last freed. When she heard of this from Lucinda, Helen was at first elated. But word eventually came through that her Mama and Papa and her Uncle Albert were sadly not amongst those survivors, and she was again deeply saddened to find that her hopes had finally been cruelly dashed.

Shortly after that, a general election was called and, to most people's relief, it was a landslide victory for the Social Democrats, a newly rising star on the political scene, and at last the curfews and martial law were lifted and the rebuilding could finally begin.



Randal and Helen said their farewells to the good folk of *Foxholes* the following Spring, on May Day to be exact, which was as auspicious a date as any other in the calendar. They'd finished their studies at the college now, though they faithfully promised to stay in touch and looked forward to the annual reunions.

Dave and Logan had moved out the previous September and for a time they'd shared a flat together; but before long, feeling

homesick, Logan had returned to his family in Gothgoria.

They dropped-by every now and again to see how Dave was getting on and were happy to see that he was still on the wagon and had not only found himself a steady job but also a pleasant lady companion, Katharine, whom he clearly loved a great deal in his own, idiosyncratic way. Little by little she was making useful inroads into his life and gently turning him around.

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**The End**

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